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❶ "The night sky was filled with enemy planes, and the earth shook with explosions. At the height of the raid we learned a bomb had smashed a gas main near the works. Rourke and I volunteered for the fixing job...

❷ "We found it," continued Rourke. "A big delayed action bomb sitting on a severed pipe in the middle of a three-foot crater. We set to work. Letts held the flashlight, taking care to shield it so the Nazis couldn't see it, while I blocked the broken pipe with clay.

❸ "In about 12 minutes the job was done. They were the longest minutes we've ever lived. We couldn't have done it without our flashlight—and the steady light from fresh batteries you can depend on."

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These are our enemies.
They have only one idea—to kill, and kill,
and kill, until they conquer the world.
Then, by the whip, the sword and the gallows, they will rule.
No longer will you be free to speak or write your thoughts, to worship God in your own way.
Only our dead will be free. Only the host who will fall before the enemy will know peace.
Civilization will be set back a thousand years.
Make no mistake about it—you cannot think of this as other wars.
You cannot regard your foe this time simply as people with a wrong idea.
This time you win—or die. This time you get no second chance.
This time you free the world, or else you lose it.
Surely that is worth the best fight of your life
—worth anything that you can give or do.

Throughout the country there is increasing need for civilian war service. To enlist the help of every citizen, the Government has organized the Citizens Service Corps as part of local Defense Councils. If there is no Defense Council in your community, or if it has not set up a Service Corps, help to organize one. If one exists, cooperate with it in every possible way. Write this magazine for a free booklet telling you what to do and how to do it. Join the fight for Freedom—now!

EVERY CIVILIAN A FIGHTER

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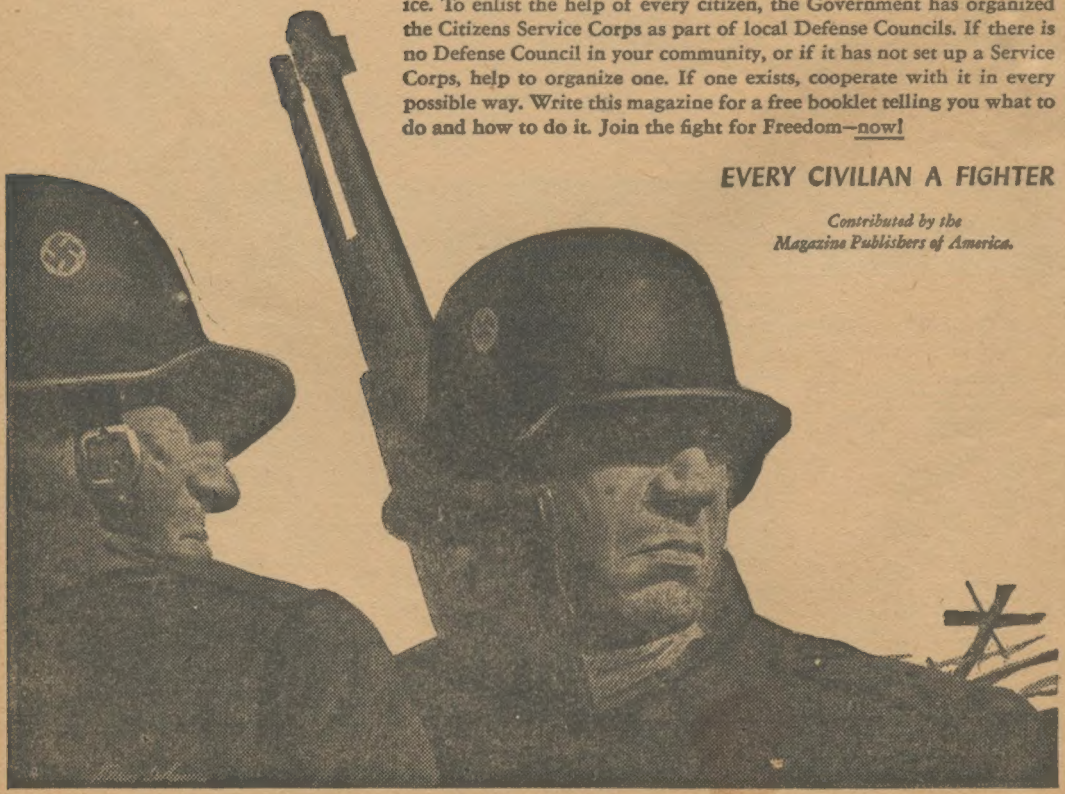

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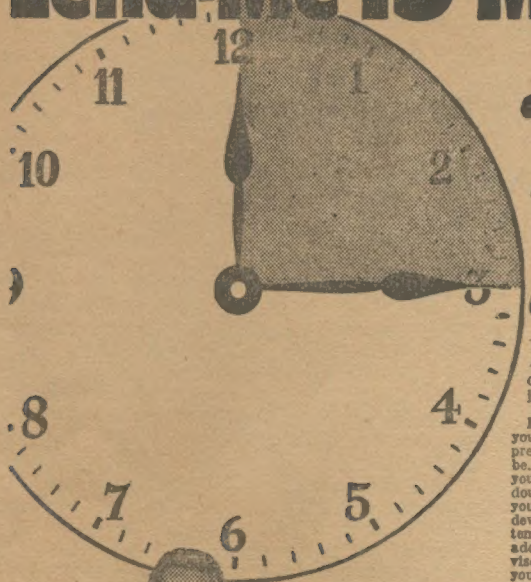
..and I'll prove I can make you a NEW MAN



I'M "trading-in" old bodies for new! I'm taking men who know that the condition of their arms, shoulders, chests and legs—their strength, "wind," and endurance—is not 100%. And I'm making NEW MEN of them.

I don't care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double quick time! I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that there's not even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

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What 15 Minutes a Day Can Do For You

Are you ALL MAN—tough-muscled, on your toes every minute, with all the up-and-at-'em that can lick your weight in wildcats? Or do you need the help I can give you—the help that has already worked such wonders for other fellows, everywhere?

In just 15 minutes a day, right in the privacy of your own home, I'm ready to prove that *"Dynamic Tension"* can lay a new outfit of solid muscle over every inch of your body. Let me put new, smashing power into your arms and shoulders—give you an armor-shield of stomach muscle that laughs at punches—strengthen your legs into real columns of surging stamina. If lack of exercise or wrong living has weakened you inside, I'll get after that condition, too, and show you how it feels to LIVE!

Actual photo of the man who holds the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

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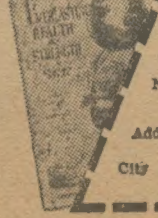

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A Department for Readers Conducted by

CAPTAIN RANGER

IF THERE is one trait that more than any other distinguishes Americans it is the habit they have of getting hard jobs done in record time. The pioneers established roads into the West that were marvels of pathfinding, though the routes themselves were little more than winding wagon trails. Road building is an old American custom. It built up the country.

We are still at it. A new highway, the sixteen hundred mile auto road to Alaska, has only recently been completed. Just seven months and seventeen days after construction of this important route began a ceremony was held deep in the Yukon country of the far North.

A New Frontier

A small group of Army officers and government officials gathered on the bleak slopes of Soldier's Summit overlooking the frozen surface of Kluane lake.

Snow sifted down from craggy, white heights of the St. Elias mountain range piled in lonely grandeur to the West. The men hovered around huge bonfires, and stamped their feet to keep warm. A military band played martial music. Red-coated Mounties, members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police lent color to the scene.

Ribbons of red, white and blue were cut. Officials made speeches. A line of U.S. Army trucks that had made the trip up from Dawson creek, the road's southern terminus in British Columbia, rumbled past the barrier on their way over the long miles of empty Arctic wilderness towards Fairbanks, Alaska.

The road to Alaska, long dreamed of by many as a means of opening up our incredibly rich northern empire, was thus officially opened on November 20th, 1942, more than *three months ahead of schedule*. A new frontier had been made accessible.

A Saga of Fortitude

Though the northern terminus of the highway is Fairbanks, the real objective of the road is not simply a single city in the far North. It is the opening up eventually of all Alaska to overland auto travel.

Building this great long, thin thread of road, miles and miles of it through virgin country that hadn't even heretofore been explored by the native Indians or the scattered trappers in the region, was a real saga of modern American fortitude, courage, endurance and ingenuity. U.S. Army engineers had charge of the job, but the bulk of the work was carried out by American youngsters, both white and colored, from every State in the Union.

During the road's construction these modern pioneers lived mostly in tents. They worked hard through the long hours of the Arctic summer twilight.

They kept at it when fall came and the days grew shorter and the nights colder. Icy winds swept down from the North. Blizzards blew across their path. Snow swirled around their makeshift homes as camps were moved from one place to another.

But still the road went through, ahead of schedule, because it was an urgently needed supply link to our far-flung Alaskan Army bases.

The road was constructed as a military project. Army trucks are tooling over it today. However, there is every indication that when peace comes this new feeder line to our hitherto little developed northern empire will usher in a great period of expansion in Alaska.

In the resettling of a shattered world, the road to Alaska will mean to many the road to a new home in America, a new chance to settle in a frontier land and build their own homesteads just as their forebears did in the West when it was younger.

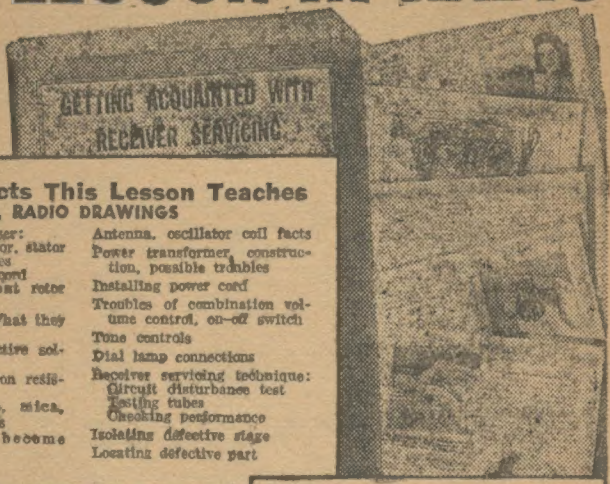
Homesteading Boom

Thanks to the highway there will probably be a homesteading boom in the rich and fertile soil sections of Alaska that are as yet for the most part total strangers to a plough. It has been estimated that the Tanana valley alone contains nearly *five million* acres, most of which may be adaptable to future homesteading and the growing of northern climate produce.

It has already been demonstrated that agriculturally, Alaska is far from the barren, frozen, heartless land that some people still believe it to be. Alaska can and does produce all the hardy vegetables, grains, forage plants,

(Continued on page 10)

FREE LESSON IN RADIO



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WITH 31 PHOTOS, SKETCHES, RADIO DRAWINGS

How superheterodyne receivers work
How to remove tubes, tube shields
Three reasons why Radio tubes fail
Electrodynamic loudspeaker:
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Replacing damaged cone
Recentering voice coil
Remedies for open field coil

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Gang tuning condenser:
Construction of rotor, stator
How capacity varies
Restringing dial cord
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More Radio Technicians and Operators Now Make $50 a Week Than Ever Before

There's a big shortage of capable Radio Technicians and Operators because so many have joined the Army and Navy. Fixing Radios pays better now than for years. With new Radios out of production, fixing old sets, which were formerly traded in, adds greatly to the normal number of servicing jobs.

Broadcasting Stations, Aviation and Police Radio, Ship Radio and other communications branches are scrambling for Operators and Technicians to replace men who are leaving. You may never see a time again when it will be so easy to get started in this fascinating field. The Government, too, needs hundreds of competent civilian and enlisted Radio men and women. Radio factories, with huge war orders to fill, have been advertising for trained personnel. And think of the NEW jobs Television, Frequency Modulation, and Electronics will open after the war! This is the sort of opportunity you shouldn't pass up.

Many Beginners Soon Make $5, $10 a Week Extra in Spare Time

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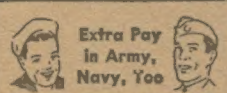

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TRAIL BLAZERS

(Continued from page 8)

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(Continued on page 91)

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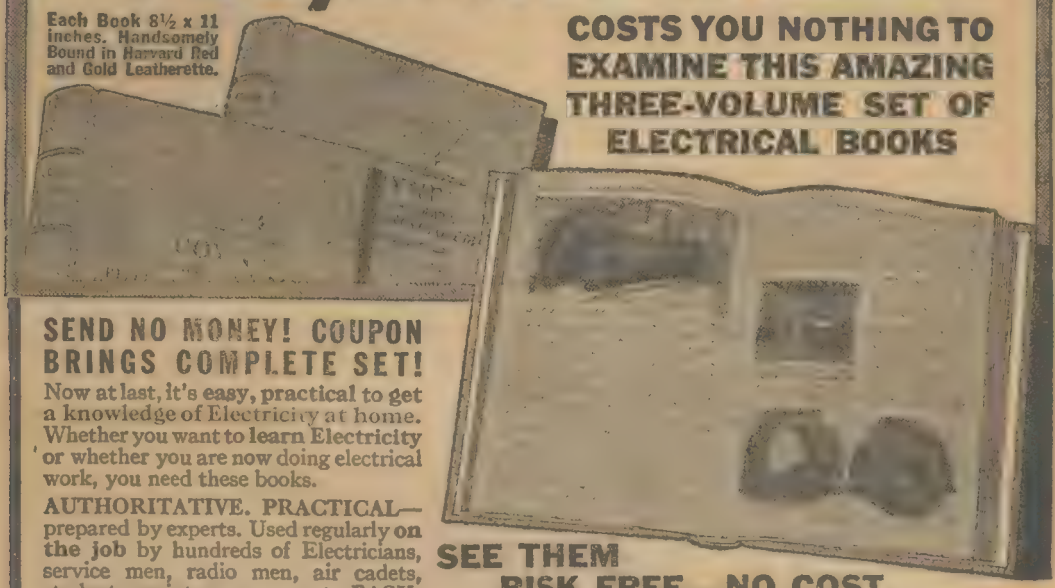

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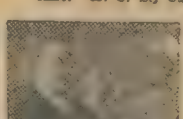

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A big man stepped into the firelight with guns leveled

HERD OF PERIL

By GLENN A. CONNOR

CHAPTER I

Owlhoot Bargain

THE reputation of Crooknose Keough along the border country was unsavory and not altogether undeserved. For when direct action was not the thing, Keough used his wits.

By white men he was called Crooknose, because his nose made two twists from the bridge to the end like the wriggle of a snake. But to the Mexicans and the Indians he was known as El Zorro, the cunning fellow or dog fox.

Crooknose was a small man who might have been anywhere between thirty and fifty. That was on account of his life, savvy? As a matter of fact, he had just turned twenty eight. He was red of hair and impatient of painfulness at any time, meaning that anyone tromping on his toes was inviting disaster. His close-set blue eyes were hard as diamonds and

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set in flaxen lashes. Back of his restless energy was a flinty quality that often expressed itself callously.

Keough was an unhandsome hombre, and his looks did not often invite trust. Still he had his own peculiar codes; he could be unflinchingly ethical in certain cases and, when he wished it, he had the ability and the will to inspire trust upon occasion.

His latest trouble began in Huerto, headquarters for border raiders, supply point for one or two adjacent big cow outfits. Sullen and squalid, it stood on the desert within a few convenient miles of the Rio Grande. The men who galloped jaded horses into its dusty street were a hard-eyed gentry and invariably wore a price on their heads.

It was, to sift the matter down to the cold facts, Keough's fault. He should have confined his habit of manslaughter to Mexican brigands and Apache outlaws. But in shooting Lars Oakes he shot an IXL cowboy.

BELEAGUERED BY SINISTER BORDER BANDITS, A LONE WOLF OF THE RANGE STAKES ALL IN A DESPERATE BATTLE FOR JUSTICE!

IT HAPPENED in the Jumbo, a saloon and gambling hall that was the pulsating heart of Huerto's mad and reckless life. A poker game was in progress, at which sat players who were not friends.

There was a row over so small a matter as an ace-high straight and when the smoke cleared away it was found that Crooknose had committed an indiscretion. One of the players, a red-faced, sullen cowboy, who had been playing throughout the game with a smouldering ferocity, lay dead.

He had questioned Keough's integrity in holding an ace-high straight. His blunder of missing Crooknose by a scant fraction of an inch when he pulled his gun, did not lessen the error of Keough's own deadly accuracy.

For Red-Face was Lars Oakes, and Lars Oakes rode for the IXL rancho from which an unhealthy retinue had ridden into Huerto that day. No less than three IXL hands were present at the time of the shooting, but Crooknose was too gun-fast for them to take up the argument by themselves. They slipped inconspicuously out the back way to gather reinforcements.

Keough was perfectly familiar with the procedure in such matters, and knew that soon he would be overwhelmed by sheer numbers. Not being bountifully supplied with personal admirers or supporters among those present, there was just one thing left for Keough to do. It was to depart before Red-Face's friends could mobilize their forces.

Quickly the avengers gathered and sought him. Two of them overtook him a pace from his horse. He turned and showed his teeth in the brilliant but mirthless grin that usually preceded his deeds of violence. The two fell back without making it necessary for him to even reach for his weapons. They watched him canter off while waiting for greater strength of numbers.

With his springing palomino under him, Crooknose felt little care or uneasiness. After a mile gallop, he drew to the range-rider's jogging trot and rode north until he struck the black-rimmed mesa country. He bore to the west here, keeping to the high mesquite where the dry, baked dobe left scarcely a hoof mark.

There was left still two hours of daylight when Keough rode into a small oasis. There was a strip of sand-grass for his palomino and a little trickle of seldom water for both. Crooknose knew of this hidden spring through a 'Pache tracker he had employed at odd times to help him run down wild mustangs.

He pulled the saddle off the palomino, watered him at the sandstone basin, and picketed him to graze. Then he took a long drink himself, shouldered his saddle, and withdrew into the mesquite.

Tied in his oilskin slicker behind the cantle were such emergency rations as one of Keough's status might require at most any time. A bit of bacon, a small bag of coffee, a container of salt, some hard tack he had pilfered from a bivouacking army detail. Not a hearty meal for a healthy eater, but capable of staying the belly of a man like Keough for several days from rubbing his backbone.

He waited for night before he built a fire and made preparations for supper. His fire could not be distinguished a hundred feet away in the thick-growing mesquite, but its smoke feathering

Crooknose whirled on Santano and his wolves

up in the still air might have been seen for several miles in daylight.

He took from his slicker-held equipment a small and blackened frying pan with a collapsible handle, a like small and blackened coffee can. On second thought he returned the coffee can. He seldom drank coffee at night, it too often kept him awake when he wanted to sleep. Later he would fill it with water from the spring.

In the frying pan he cut and laid out two thin slivers of bacon, added bits of the hardtack to toast and absorb the grease, and set the pan on the glowing coals he raked to one side of the fire.

And then, just as Crooknose leaned forward to put a stick on the fire, a dry twig snapped in the shadows back of him!

KEOUGH'S mind was never slow. He realized, all in that split instant, as he crouched there with the wood still extended, what a perfect target he made, outlined in the fireglow, to any hidden marksman in the shadows. To move, to go for his guns, would be not only a waste of time, but sure suicide.

So he did not even come out of his crouch. He swiveled slowly on his boot heels toward the sound in the dark, keeping his grip on the wood and his other hand tensed, but away from gun butt.

"That's smart, Keough," said a scratchy voice from the darkness. Amusement lurked in the tones. "If I'd wanted to plug you I coulda done it long ago. Don't make any moves, I'm comin' out."

Keough waited. A big man materialized in the gloom, stepped into the circle of firelight with guns leveled. He was tall, with a hawk beak, thin, pointed moustache and small, fiery eyes. He had a vicious cast of features and an arrogant manner.

Keough gave him a stony, searching appraisal. The short hairs on the back of his neck crawled and he felt a prickling sensation along his nerves. But he was frankly curious.

"All right," he said, putting the wood carefully on the fire. "You can see I ain't reached for my gun. You can sheathe your fangs now."

The stranger chuckled. With a quick movement he put both guns away and stood across the fire from Crooknose with empty hands.

Crooknose was puzzled, uneasy. His hard-cased eyes probed the shadows from which his visitor had come.

"Aw, it's all right; I'm alone," the stranger said, as if reading Keough's thoughts. "I tracked you till after sundown, then seein' you was headed toward Hidden Spring, I hit straight here, too."

"I don't savvy your business here," Crooknose muttered, alert for some trick. "I never saw you before that I know of."

"I'll come to that pronto," said his visitor. "Right now I better save this bacon from burnin'."

He stooped, lifted the frying pan off the coals and set it to one side. He hunkered down and squinted up at Crooknose from under beetling brows.

"They told me back there," he made a gesture in the general direction of Huerto, "that you're Crooknose Keough. That right?"

THE hard glitter in Keough's eyes quickened.

"Maybe," he growled. "What about it?"

"And you killed a man in Huerto today?" persisted his visitor. "Fellow by name of Lars Oakes. Rides for the IXL."

Crooknose caught the predatory glint in his eyes, the cruel flicker; but he answered recklessly.

"I heard someone call him Oakes. But you're calling the shots. Go on."

His visitor laughed shortly.

"I'm Thurber. . . . Mitch Thurber."

Keough's eyes slitted. That was the only sign he gave that he recognized the name of the IXL owner. His cold eyes met Thurber's in an unflinching regard. A curious, detached smile crossed his thin lips.

"What's your desire, Thurber?" he queried softly.

"If I followed my desire," Thurber snarled, showing his yellow teeth, "I'd let daylight through you for what you did to Oakes! But it so happens I got use for you, Keough. I've got a job it struck me you're peculiarly fitted for. Take it and I'll forget what happened to Lars Oakes. I'll give you five hundred dollars in the bargain," added

Thurber hastily as the lips of Crooknose curled.

"That's *some* better, Thurber. I'd hate to have you bargain with me because of killing a man," said Keough softly.

Thurber flushed, but let the challenge go.

"I s'pose you speak Mex, Keough?" he said.

"About nine times better'n I talk American." Crooknose grinned thinly. "What's your proposition, Thurber?"

Then Thurber betrayed a flash of malignance that at once put Keough on his guard. Suddenly he knew that Thurber had lied. He wasn't alone! His quick, darting glance past Crooknose before he started talking, told Keough someone was still in the mesquite and had him covered. And then he knew, whatever Thurber's proposition was, he had his choice of accepting or of being shot in the back.

But Keough didn't betray his knowledge by the flicker of an eyelash. Knowing that cleverness is only reduced by passion, he held his temper in hand.

"What's your proposition?" Crooknose demanded again, in a cold, level voice.

"Just this," rasped Thurber, peering up from hooded eyes. "There's an IXL herd starts north in the morning. A crew of Mexican vaqueros will be trailin' 'em. *I want you to stampede that herd, Keough.*"

CHAPTER II

Thurber Sets a Trap

STAMPEDE an IXL herd? For an instant Crookhouse stared at him. Then he chuckled inwardly. He knew Thurber wasn't asking him to stampede a herd of his own cattle. It just meant that Thurber had sold the herd. Not even road-branded, Crooknose bet himself.

"So you'll pay me five hundred to stampede an IXL herd!" Crooknose mused. "Why that ought to be easy, Thurber. . . ."

"Sure, it's easy," Thurber put in quickly. "It's just a matter of getting friendly with them Mexicans trailin' the herd. That's why I asked if you spoke their lingo. All you do is wait till they get the herd into the Espinal Hills. Then you stampede 'em, see? Simple? Why, that five hundred will be just like a gift. In the chaparral the herd 'll scatter itself from hell to breakfast!"

Keough nodded thoughtfully.

"You'll take it?" asked Thurber eagerly.

Too eagerly, Crooknose thought. But he didn't hesitate.

"Sure I will, Thurber. Looks like a profitable chore to yours truly. Five hundred, cash in hand."

"You'll get the five hundred *after* the stampede is pulled off," stated Thurber.

"Listen, Thurber," Keough clipped, "I don't do business in that fashion. It's cash in advance or the deal's off."

Thurber flushed with anger. His glittering eyes flicked past Keough again, into the mesquite, his face contorted. Crooknose felt his hatred and animosity.

But Thurber gained control of himself, apparently changing his mind about forcing the issue. With a disgruntled growl of surrender, he reached into his pocket and brought out a thick roll of bills. Keough's fingers relaxed above his guns.

"But mark my words, Keough!" snarled Thurber, after he had handed over the money. "If you double-cross me, by old Scratch, I'll—" His cruel, inflamed eyes and twisted features conveyed his meaning.

Crooknose grinned back at him undisturbed.

"That's all right, Thurber. You can depend on me. You're paying me this money to stampede an IXL herd. I give you my word I'll do it."

Crooknose didn't miss the sudden wicked gleam of satisfaction in Mitch Thurber's shifty eyes. What he couldn't see was the big, frost-face hombre in the shadows back of him, who eased the hammer of a Winchester carbine down and faded silently into the night with a gloating grin on his hard face. Crooknose didn't know Pete Salter, nor that he had sworn to avenge the death of Oakes. But now that was unnecessary; Thurber had the cards stacked and Salter's revege could be no sweeter than

what Thurber had stored up for Keough.

CROOKNOSE sat staring into the fire in deep thought after Thurber had gone. Shrewdly he reviewed Thurber's proposition. His purpose seemed apparent enough. Thurber meant to steal back the herd he had sold. But Keough was just as certain there was something else back of Thurber's duplicity.

He didn't waste much time guessing. He thought he would learn quick enough when he joined the herd. He put his wits to work on what was apparent. A slow smile grew on his hard features as his mind drifted into another channel.

Adjoining the IXL range on the north was the Two Bar, owned by Keough's old friend, Humpy Lewis. Lewis had come into possession some two years previous and Keough had not seen him since. He considered Humpy to some length.

Humpy had been a hell-cat in his younger days, ready for anything. The fact that he had been settled the past few years in no way convinced Crooknose his friend had entirely reformed.

Finally Crooknose slapped his leg.

"I'll do it!" he chuckled to himself. "Sure I'll stampede an IXL herd for Thurber. But it won't be no profit to him!"

Humpy's outfit lay sixty miles north of Huerto. Keough changed his mind about spending the night at Hidden Spring. He made a quick meal of his bacon slivers and hardtack and washed it down at the spring on the way to get his palomino.

He set out southwest through the mesquite. He followed no trail but instinct guided him unerringly after several hours, into a little clearing. He reined up before the Mexican hovel whose outside walls were almost entirely covered with drying chili peppers and roots.

This was the casa of Apache Joe, the tracker who on numerous occasions, had been employed by Keough. Within a pace of the door Crooknose called softly.

"José!"

There was a momentary silence. Then an almost inaudible stir. Keough's quick eyes caught a movement of the rag hanging over the single window. He grinned inwardly. Hiding his casa here in the thick chaparral wasn't Apache Joe's only precaution.

The next moment he was at the door.

"Senor El Zorro! What brings you here at this hour, amigo?" he asked in rapid Spanish.

"Never mind that now, José," returned Crooknose. "Dress quickly. I want you to carry a message to my friend, Humpy Lewis. You will find him at the rancho Two-Bar. I want you to ride as though the devil was at your heels."

Crooknose wrote his message while Apache Joe was getting into his clothes. Crooknose wrote on a scrap of wrapping paper with the lead of a forty-five cartridge. Apache Joe could not spell his own name, so owned no writing material. Then while the Indian was getting his horse, Crooknose filled up on tortillas and Mexican beans.

Keough and Apache Joe departed together. But after a few miles they separated.

"You will bring me Senor Lewis' answer, José, without delay. Keep watch for a herd of cattle trailing north, somewhere between the IXL and the Espinal Hills. I will be with them. But you will not ride down. Send up a smoke signal and I will meet you."

AT DAYLIGHT Crooknose was stretched out on a knob that looked down on the IXL buildings from more than a mile away. The sky was just starting to crimson. Some distance beyond the ranch he saw a black blot stir, then envelope in a cloud of yellow dust. Soon they became visible again, a narrow ribbon of swaying backs as the herd strung out on trail.

A cordon of riders stirred up the drag, swing riders galloped to their places on the flanks to hold them to their course. Crooknose knew this was the herd in question. He looked back to where the camp had been pitched and saw the wagons pulling out, a streamer of dust rising lazily into the air as they struck the trail.

Crooknose did not ride down to the IXL; that was to invite trouble of a brand he was not seeking at the moment. He bellied back out of sight and returned to the palomino he had left grazing back of the knoll.

Crooknose followed a coulee until he

was safely beyond view of the ranch or the herd. He rode steadily for an hour north, then drew off into the mesquite. He slept for four hours, then again saddled his palomino and rode forth. If Thurber or any of his men were chaperoning the herd, he thought, they had probably turned back by now.

It was almost noon when he again picked up sight of the herd. He was surprised at the distance they had covered, and it gave him food for thought. He did not ride down immediately but drew rein, observing from a point of vantage.

The long column shuffled up the trail northward at a half trot. The foremost steers stood out against the barren background, clear red and white and buckskin and black, under the intense blue of the sky. Behind them rose a haze of dust stirred by the scuffling hooves. Still farther back the dust thickened into a gray cloud that hung over and veiled all the rear of the herd.

The herd was being crowded, hour after hour under the fierce sun. Were they crazy? Or did they suspect Thurber's designs? There was haste and something of apprehension in this rapid movement, Crooknose at once decided.

The wagons had stopped at a willow fringed stream for the noon hour. Crooknose rustled the bills in his pocket, a slow smile drawing his thin lips into tight lines. He nodded his head as he reached a decision. Then he set his palomino at a gallop toward the camp.

A hundred yards from camp Crooknose ran into her. She left the drag and cantered toward him. At first, because of her leather chaps and big Stetson, he thought her a man, until she came close and he saw her face, saw her draw rein and stare at him.

"Who are you?" she demanded without preliminary.

Crooknose blinked at her, wondering what she was doing with the herd. *This girl.* . . . Brown and alive as a desert squaw and as pretty as a rose!

"Well, why don't you speak up?" she demanded tartly, as Crooknose gawked.

Crooknose jerked his hat off.

"You sort of took me off my feet, ma'am," he said apologetically. "I was looking for an IXL herd trailing north. . . ."

"This herd is trailing north," she cut in. "And I bought it from the IXL."

Her gaze probed him. He detected an almost frantic light in her gold-flecked eyes, mingled with unusual suspicion. Her eyes dropped to take in his two thong-tied guns, then jerked quickly back to his face.

"Did someone send you here? Was it Mitch Thurber?" she demanded, even before Crooknose could answer her first query.

HER herd. Crooknose had difficulty comprehending that. He controlled his dumbfoundment with an effort.

"Ma'am, if I was you I wouldn't trust Thurber no further'n I could throw a bull by the tail," he heard himself saying.

"I don't," she surprised him. "That's why I asked if he sent you."

"He did," Crooknose surprised her in turn. "He also paid me five hundred dollars to stampede your herd."

The girl's mouth fell open as she stared at him.

"Why do you tell me this?" she gasped.

"I'm spreadin' my cards on the table, ma'am. Just in case you wasn't sure where Thurber stands."

"I was quite sure where he stood," she said, a glinting flame in her eyes. She hesitated, looked at Crooknose again, then said impulsively, "I'll lay my cards on the table, too, mister. I walked into Mitch Thurber's trap like a blind little fool! I was in the market to buy a bunch of cattle, and I received a letter from down here that the IXL had some cattle to sell cheap. I came a-running. . . . It never occurred to me to inquire who owned the IXL brand. The letter was signed by Lars Oakes, superintendent. . . ."

"I'm glad I killed him," growled Crooknose.

"What's that?"

"I killed Oakes yesterday. But never mind. Go on with your story."

"I didn't know Thurber owned the IXL until I had closed the deal. I bought more cattle than I had bargained on. But the price was so low. . . . I took twenty five hundred head instead of a thousand as I first intended. I had to mortgage my ranch. . . ."

The girl suddenly choked. But she

had said enough. Well, not quite all. She seemed to have known Thurber previously. . . .

"And that's where Thurber cropped up?"

She nodded sorrowfully.

"When I went to sign the mortgage papers. There was Mitch Thurber's name, the mortgagee!" She choked again, then went on stoutly, "But I wouldn't back out then. I'd gotten them cheap, I couldn't see how Thurber could keep me from coming out ahead on them."

"But now?" intimated Crooknose.

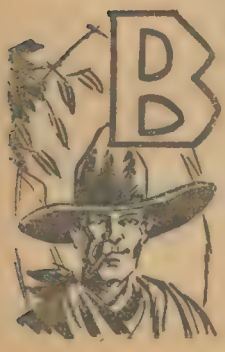
"Now! Yes, after it's too late! I see that I got the herd entirely too cheap! Ten dollars a head and worth fifteen of any man's money! I see now that it wasn't any coincidence that the IXL couldn't rustle me anything but a crew of Mexican trail drivers! Nor that it didn't just happen they had their corrals jammed with their own cattle so that I couldn't road-brand my stuff! Oh, it's all plain enough to me now!" she cried.

"And to me!" muttered Crooknose, his face savage. "Except one or two things. Would you mind tellin' me, ma'am; where'd you know Thurber before?"

"Dad and Thurber used to be in partnership over in the Mesa Verde country a few years ago, but Thurber was so crooked Dad bought his interests and kicked him off the ranch. Several weeks later Dad was picked up off the range. . . ." The girl gasped and tried to stifle a sob. "Riddled with lead!"

CHAPTER III

Blood Foes Meet



BEFORE Crooknose could express his sympathy, the girl brushed her tears away with an angry gesture at her momentary weakness.

"I have always thought that Mitch Thurber did it," she said then, her lips drawn into straight lines, "because he disappeared from the country right at the time."

Crooknose thoughtfully changed the subject.

"What if your herd got stampeded and you lost it?"

"I'd be busted flatter than h-flat."

Crooknose grinned at her almost slip, though there was little else to find humor in.

"And Mitch Thurber would have my outfit!" she added savagely.

"That looks to me now like that's what he's playin' for," admitted Crooknose. "It just ain't possible to hide the trail of this herd of dogies. But you have got an out."

"What's that?" she asked quickly.

"Get your brand on them critters, Pronto."

She shook her head hopelessly.

"Don't you suppose I've considered that? I mean to do so just as quick as I can. But we've got to have corrals. Trying to range brand them is out of the question. Half these Mexicans aren't even vaqueros. I'm too short handed."

Crooknose nodded and frowned.

"That's that, then." He gave her a direct look. "Got any other ideas for saving your little quadrupeds?" He added quickly, "You see, even if I don't stampede 'em, Thurber'll see somebody else does."

"I understand we have to cross the Two Bar range. I thought when we got there I would get permission to use their corrals if . . ." She stopped suddenly, staring at Crooknose, realizing suddenly the significance of his words. A puzzled light grew in her eyes.

"Then you mean you're not . . ." She hesitated. "I don't seem to be able to understand you, Mr. . . ."

"Dave Keough. You can call me Crooknose if you like; everybody does," he grinned. "My twisted beak is to blame."

The girl smiled, too. Crooknose somehow looked different when he smiled like that.

"So Thurber paid *you* five hundred dollars to stampede my herd," she mused, regarding him critically. Her gaze weighed and measured him. What she saw seemed to increase her assurance.

"Cash in hand," Crooknose answered, drawing the roll of bills from his pocket and showing her.

"Five hundred dollars for twenty-five thousand dollars worth of cattle, and a fifty thousand dollar ranch throwed in to boot!" she blazed bitterly. "Mitch Thurber certainly plans on breaking me cheap enough!"

"That's the way I figure, ma'am," Crooknose drawled. "Too cheap for my blood. Just about now I'd enjoy having that snake's neck clamped inside my fingers."

"Then you're really not going to stampede my herd?"

Crooknose considered, then answered slowly, carefully.

"Ma'am, it's like this. I can take a life for I only take trash. I'll try'n outsharp the sharpest poker player, because I'm just playin' the other man's game. But stealin' . . ." He shook his head with a disparaging smile. "Stealin' is something else, ma'am. I was brought up to believe that stealin' veils a man in the darkest shadow of disrepute. And if I was to stampede your critters, it would be just like stealin'. Now wouldn't it, ma'am?"

The girl overlooked the evasive reply in her surprise at his philosophy. But she did think to ask him, in frank curiosity, why he had accepted payment from Thurber to commit that identical crime?

"Why, ma'am," said Crooknose frankly, "if I hadn't accepted Thurber's offer, I wouldn't be here talkin' to you now. And he'd be having someone else doing the job that might not be so squeamish. Right now I'd be layin' out there in the mesquite for buzzard bait.

"You see, Thurber is one hombre who don't overlook any tricks. All the time he was putting this proposition up to me, he had a hole-card covering me from the brush. At the same time he was giving me a chance to redeem myself for dusting one Lars Oakes."

Then and there the girl made an impulsive decision.

"Come along down to camp, Dave Keough," she said briskly, and turned her horse's head about. "I'm going to gamble on you," she said back over her shoulder. "The job of wrangling these Mexicans and seeing my herd through safe is yours, if you'll take it. And I do hope you understand their lingo, because I've been having the devil's own time making them understand what I want."

"I can talk Mex better than they can talk it themselves," Crooknose said as he spurred alongside. "But I'd feel a heap more at home, ma'am, if I knowed the name of my boss."

"Oh, haven't I told you my name yet?" she smiled. "It must have been the thrill of meeting you, Crooknose. My name is Kate Daggett. Disliking to be called 'Miss' and 'Ma'am', you may just call me Kate."

When Estaban Guerrera, her segundo, rode in to dinner, Kate introduced him to Crooknose, explaining almost in the same breath that Crooknose would have charge of the drive henceforward.

Crooknose regretted that he had permitted her to speak before the words were out of her mouth. But he could not very well have stopped her, for Kate spoke swiftly, almost gleefully.

Neither man offered to shake hands. Neither man spoke . . . just stood there glaring at each other. Keough's fingers curled like talons over the butts of his guns, that brilliant, dangerous smile on his thin lips. The black eyes of Esta-

[*Turn page*]

ban Guerrera glittered back like the beady eyes of a suddenly aroused rattlesnake, his hand out of sight in the broad red sash about his slim hips.

Estaban Guerrera indeed. Recognition was written in the distorted face of Crooknose, and he knew no Estaban Guerrera. The segundo was Santano Lazaro, the hell-hewn chieftain of the border raiders.

Here were two men facing each other of strong blood and intense hatred. For one tense, nerve-rending moment the air was heavy with death as the two glared at each other. Kate Daggett felt it; her gaze grew horror-stricken. Their ferocious animosity . . . She could imagine but one outcome.

She tore her half-fascinated gaze from the sinister, convulsed features of her segundo with a shudder, and looked at Crooknose. She shrank back before the ruthless deviltry of his bitter face. The menace in his cold, blue eyes sent a chill through her slim body.

AND then the threat seemed to pass. A faint grin, half bitter but tolerant, touched Keough's hard mouth. His tense form relaxed almost imperceptibly.

"Well, we meet again, hey, Santano?" Crooknose drawled.

"Si, Senor," purred Santano. "The last time . . ."

"Let us forget the last time," said Crooknose quickly, "for now. It's a pity the wolves I killed belonged to your pack, Lazaro, but you may yet have time and opportunity to even the score. But now it might be to our mutual benefit to declare a truce. Temporarily only, Lazaro. I am here at the behest of Senor Thurber."

Crooknose spoke for several minutes, the bandit leader critically silent. Kate had no way of knowing what he said, for Crooknose addressed Lazaro entirely in Spanish.

That Lazaro seemed to accept the temporary truce noways deceived Crooknose. While the Mexican listened attentively to his foe's proposition, he neither accepted nor rejected. This definitely gave Crooknose food for thought.

Kate Daggett wished that she understood Spanish. She would have given anything to know what Keough said to Guerrera: Guerrera slanted such odd glances at her while Crooknose talked. She felt inward qualms despite her determination to trust him.

"And now you will see the herd is adequately protected until the time to strike," Crooknose said in conclusion.

Lazaro withdrew with a mocking bow. Keough frowned after him, tempted for a moment to tell Kate Daggett the real identity of her segundo. But no, he decided, she already had too much to worry her. He turned to her with his broad grin that was at once reassuring.

"Looks like we're going to cut the mustard, Senorita Kate."

"I'd like awfully well to know what all you said to Guerrera," she said, regarding him sharply.

Keough's chuckle was disarming.

"Most of it wouldn't sound nice in English, and before a lady," he said.

"I didn't think you two were going to get along the way you started out," she frowned. "You really had me frightened."

"Oh, that." Crooknose waved a careless hand. "I was just getting my bluff in first. Like this." He made her a hideous face. Kate shrank back laughing. "You see how it is. Laz—I mean Guerrera knows where he stands now."

But Kate didn't see. She knew the face Crooknose made at her was not the same. She was uneasy, uncertain, not a little dismayed. She wondered just a little if she had been right about Crooknose.

NEITHER was Keough as self-assured as he spoke. Lazaro was a wily rat, too tricky to take anything for granted. Keough excused himself on the pretext of looking after his horse. While he bent over the cinch, his mind ran like a mill-race. Queries popped in and out of his head. What was Lazaro doing in charge of Kate Daggett's herd? Did Thurber know Guerrera was Santano Lazaro? If he didn't then the joke was partly on Thurber!

But what if Thurber had hired Lazaro, knowing who he was?

Keough swore under his breath. That was the way of it, of course! Lazaro and his cutthroats were hired to make off with the herd! Thurber would lose the herd but would get possession of Kate Daggett's ranch!

Answers came thick and fast now, Keough's wits working in high. With ruthless cunning, Thurber thought he saw a means of outwitting Lazaro and so had dealt with him, Crooknose, to stampede the herd.

"Well, split my buttons, if Thurber don't take the cake!" Crooknose paid him grudging tribute. "Playing both ends against the middle and taking all the stakes!"

Another thought gave him pause. His face screwed in a bitter grimace.

"I went and spilled the beans to Lazaro, and him nobody's fool!" His conclusions bore out Lazaro's reticence. "Lightfoot, I've got us in a tight!"

But Keough was not thinking of himself. He was weighing the hazards as they concerned Kate Daggett.

"I've blundered," Crooknose confessed to himself. "Me, El Zorro, the fox with the infallible gift of scent. Lazaro with his throat-slitting pack, holds all the aces!

"But we still got a joker in the hole," Crooknose mused, "if José just burns grass and don't let any grow under his feet."

CHAPTER IV

Plot and Counterplot

KATE DAGGETT appeared, interrupting his musings.

"I thought you were going to take care of your horse. I've been watching you, Mister, and all you've been doing is bending over there muttering. What were you muttering about?" she demanded bluntly.

"Me? Oh. . . . You see, Kate Daggett, I was just communing with nature. It's one of my few weaknesses."

"Communing with nature," gasped Kate. *"You?"*

"Yes'm. Now take this desert for instance. You'd likely say it was dry and hot and burning up, and, excuse me, ma'am, a slice of Hades. You know them cactus has sharp thorns that prick and burn, and that what little grass there is has been grazed to the roots.

"But me now, sometimes I have the soul of an artist. I believe maybe I should've learnt to smear paint, for what I see out there is a sky of crystalline turquoise blue . . . the grays and browns of a sun-drenched landscape wavering off to a vague horizon like a robe of soft velvet.

"I sense the symphony of tawns and duns and grays, transmuted by the downpourings of dry light into an ethereal expanse of soft pure color, without weight or substance, almost without form. That, Kate Daggett, is how the desert looks to me."

Kate regarded him incredulously, scarcely able to believe her ears.

"Crooknose," she said wonderingly, "you amaze me! I never know what to expect from you next."

Keough grinned a little self-consciously. Maybe he did feel that way about the desert, but his effort had been to distract the girl. Apparently he had succeeded.

Then Crooknose forgot all about Kate Daggett as he stared toward the north. The girl was startled out of her wonder by his intent gaze.

"What is it?" she demanded quickly.

Keough didn't answer; he scarcely heard her. She followed the direction of his unwavering gaze, and then she, too, saw it. A ball of smoke was rising in the still air from the distant hilltop, spreading, feathering out. A second and a third. Kate gasped and clutched Keough's arm with nervous fingers.

"Smoke signals!" she whispered. "Who would be sending them?"

The smoke balls ceased. Crooknose turned slowly and looked at her. He shook his head, but satisfaction and relief were inadequately masked in his eyes, and Kate saw it.

"How would I know?"

To his surprise the girl stepped away from him quickly, her eyes narrowed.

"You don't seem a bit concerned," she said bitterly.

Crooknose loosened the cinch and lifted his saddle from the palomino's back. Then he again faced her.

"Looks like you've decided to mistrust me," he said soberly.

They regarded each other steadily for a moment. Kate's regard was first to waver.

"I *have* to trust you," she said, turning slowly away. "But God pity me, Crooknose, if *you* let me down."

Keough ate swiftly. He caught a fresh mount out of the remuda. Before departing in the direction of the herd, he advised the girl to get the wagons moving as quickly as the vaqueros had eaten.

But Keough did not join the herd. He took advantage of the first dry coulee that hid him from camp and rode like mad.

CROOKNOSE drew his lathered mount down to a more sedate pace as he neared the hill of the smoke signals. He was impatient and held himself in hand with difficulty. Such apprehension was unusual for him. And it was all on account of Kate Daggett.

First he was uneasy about Kate, having to leave her alone and at the mercy of Lazaro and his degenerate band even for so short a time. Then Apache Joe's signal had come hours sooner than he had expected. He was worried something had gone amiss.

Keough's eyes darted through the mesquite, searching the hillside ledges and stunted oak. Where was Apache Joe?

A soft voice from the mesquite brought him sharply about. Apache Joe emerged from his shelter grinning.

"The Senor El Zorro rides like the devil was at his heels," he said softly, indicating the lathered condition of Keough's horse.

"You must have ridden like the devil yourself, José. Tell me, did you see Senor Lewis?"

"Si, amigo mio. Senor Lewis hold rodeo in Espinal Hills. Fortunate am I to find him in those bad country."

"Ah! So that explains your getting back so soon. It is good, José. But quick. What did Humpy say?"

The Indian reached inside his shirt and brought out the message Humpy Lewis had given him for his good friend Crooknose. Keough read avidly, his features impassive. But when he looked up, even the Indian recognized the exultance in the glitter of his hard eyes. José smiled as he reported:

"After Senor Lewis read your message he say 'You bet.' He say to vaqueros, 'Get busy pronto and round up all IXL cattle they can find.' He say 'Have to work fast.' He say to me 'José, you keep eyes on herd and Crooknose and keep us inform'.' I tell him 'Si, Senor Lewis. El Zorro my very good friend as well.'"

Crooknose gripped his hand.

"You're all wool, José. Just follow the orders of Senor Lewis and all will be well. And now I will tell you what Humpy wrote me. He says they will try to have an IXL herd gathered and will hold it in the East Fork of Arroyo Blanca. I am to follow the main course of Arroyo Blanca with Señorita Daggett's herd. The trick, José, is to exchange these herds so that Miss Daggett's vaqueros are none the wiser. Humpy explains how the exchange can be made, but I have to take care of the details.

"And now I must be getting back. Senorita Daggett is down there alone, José, with a crew of *bandido* cutthroats. Santano Lazaro and his band."

"That—*malo diablo!*" Singularly imperturbable, the Indian expressed amazement.

Keough nodded balefully.

"So you see the importance of keeping Senor Lewis informed of our progress and whereabouts. You may also tell Humpy that the herd Thurber hired me to stampede, and that he also arranged with Lazaro to steal, is the property of a young lady, Miss Kate Daggett."

JOSÉ watched him wheel his horse and ride away in a cloud of dust, muttering maledictions down on the head of Santano Lazaro meanwhile. He too, had felt the ruthlessness of the border brigand.

"Dog of a dog," he muttered; "I hope you burn in flames forever!"

As Keough disappeared, the Indian glided back into the mesquite, noiseless as a shadow. He reappeared a few minutes later with the horse loaned him by Humpy Lewis and headed back into the hills. Somewhere he would pick a point of vantage to keep his vigil.

Although Kate Daggett had more important things to think about, and at the moment had her horse's nose pointed toward the hill from whence had come the smoke signals, she could not prevent her thoughts from dwelling upon the fantastic description Crooknose had rendered of their surroundings.

He was the most extraordinary and

surprising man she had ever met. There were moments when he repelled her and moments when she was captivated by his odd philosophies.

While some of his ideas were little more than banditry, she admitted he was possessed of a genius that made him spectacular. What she was most aware of just now was that his presence had produced in her an adventurous thrill.

Her mind was still wandering in these alien channels when she heard hoofbeats and saw the object of her thoughts. Keough was looking neither to right nor left, but straight ahead and riding at a dangerous gait in this heat. So thought Kate as she paused, half screened by the tall mesquite.

"Hey, you!"

Crooknose brought his horse up skidding, right hand poised above his gun as he twisted his head about. A surprised grunt escaped him as Kate Daggett rode out of the mesquite.

"Are you trying to kill that horse of mine, Mister?" she said severely. Then she smiled, showing the whitest and evenest teeth.

"So you followed me? Kate Daggett, it looks like you still don't trust me." He tried to make his tone bitter, but his relief was so great at seeing her that the attempt was a failure.

"It isn't true," she denied stoutly. "I didn't know you weren't with the herd until this very minute. I was just riding out this way to see what I could see."

"You were going to investigate that smoke?"

"Right. And now it looks like I am the one who isn't being trusted," she smiled. "Why didn't you tell me where you were going?"

CROOKNOSE wavered, tempted to tell her the truth. He thought it odd she didn't think those smoke signals had been meant for him. Instead she thought he had just ridden out to investigate. Accustomed to playing his hand out alone, he decided to let it go at that for the present at least.

He shook his head, frowning.

"I can't just make it out, ma'am. There's bare-footed horse tracks coming from the north, and moccasin prints around where the fire was built," Crooknose fabricated with convincing solemnity.

"An Indian!" ejaculated Kate, and laughed suddenly. "I'll bet it's some Indian hunter, Crooknose, signalling his friends."

Keough gave her an admiring glance and slapped his leg. "Now why didn't I think of that, Kate Daggett! And here I've been all up in the air about nothing. But we can't overlook any bets in our fix," he added cautiously.

"You said it, Mister," returned Kate, worried and pleased. "And I want to thank you for the precautions you are taking in my affairs," she said, holding out her hand. Keough accepted without guilt, for after all, he had been taking precautions.

He was glad later that he had not told her the straight of things. As they headed back for the herd at a more moderate pace, Kate Daggett talked and laughed as if she had been relieved of every care in the world.

They rode past the drag, eyed askance by the Mexican vaqueros. But no Mexican in his sober senses ever sought a quarrel with Crooknose. If hatred was contained in some of those glances, they let it go at that. Lazaro, Keough observed, was riding opposite swing. But there was nothing in his manner to indicate that he was even aware of Lazaro's presence.

Always he had laughed at romance. Wild adventure, the grim reality of action, brain fighting brain, cleverness pitted against other men's cunning, had almost brought him to regard romance as the peculiar illusion of fools.

But in spite of his cold practicability, he was brought to admit that his blood had been stirred and his pulse quickened by a beautiful face. Crooknose listened to Kate Daggett as she chattered on about her past, her hopes and ambitions for the future, with a thoughtfulness that was new and strange to him.

The afternoon waned swiftly, purple dusk settling over the desert before Crooknose was hardly aware of it. He suggested they ride ahead to where the wagons had dry-camped.

Keough set up the girl's tepee while the cook was rustling supper. It was some distance from camp, at the edge of the thick-growing mesquite. Crooknose was overlooking no emergency.

He stood with his back to the wheel of the mess-wagon while the vaqueros

rode in and ate, his thumbs hooked into the sagging cartridge belts above the black butts of his Colts, and thus he stood until the last man had eaten and ridden away again.

Kate had waited until Keough decided to eat. After stowing away a hearty supper, Keough advised:

"Better hit the hay, ma'am. I'm startin' the herd out before daylight in the mornin' so's we can make the Espinal Hills before dark."

Kate looked her disappointment. She had imagined a crackling mesquite fire and Keough's face opposite, visible through the flickering flames as he told her something of his past. But she was daunted by his brusqueness and with only a nod of assent, disappeared in the direction of her tepee.

CHAPTER V

The Fox Has Fangs

HALF AN HOUR later Crooknose carried his saddle and blanket into the mesquite. With his Colts laid within easy reach and Kate's tepee in his line of vision, he settled himself to spend an alert evening.

What would be Lazaro's first move? He could only guess. Probably try to get rid of Crooknose, he surmised.

What would happen to Kate Daggett in such an event? Did Lazaro have designs on her as well as the herd?

No answer to that one, either, but Keough could make a shrewd guess. And what he guessed jarred on his nerves.

He curled a cigarette, and then thought better of it. He couldn't even treat himself to the satisfaction of a smoke without risk. He crushed it under a boot-heel without lighting, and sat with his ears attuned for the slightest sound.

Lazaro and his unholy crew might even try to make off with the herd tonight. But Keough, on further consideration, doubted it. There were two arguments, and pretty strong ones, against the move. First, the herd had already been pushed hard all day, were tired, and the Espinal Hills were still twenty miles distant. Second, Lazaro would never let slip such an opportunity to settle a grudge of long standing; meaning Crooknose himself.

The thoughts of Crooknose were not pleasant when they ran to Lazaro. They filled him with a savagery that made him ache to use his guns. Before long, he promised himself, he would use them on the border raider and his henchmen. He and Lazaro would settle their score.

Then his thoughts switched to Kate and from Kate to Mitch Thurber. His brain rioted with passion, his thoughts became abysmal.

"Some coyotes is just to low to live," was his ultimatum, and consigned to death, "Lazaro. *Then* Thurber." The significance of the thing was less in the words than in the manner of saying. Crooknose had made himself a promise.

THE middle of the following afternoon, as the herd was nearing the Espinal Hills, a rugged chain of chaparral-covered brakes which stretched back into the heart of the IXL range, Keough rode out alone to where he could attract Lazaro's attention. As the lead of the herd wound into the first chaparral out of sight, the Mexican bandit leader rode back to join him, his black eyes narrowed in slits of suspicion. His right hand was hidden in the red sash about his waist.

"Hear me, Lazaro," Crooknose said in rapid Spanish. "I did not seek you sooner because the time was not ripe. But the Espinal Hills is where Thurber instructed me to stampede this herd. You or I are neither fools. We may quickly see his reason. All would be back on his range by morning. When the herd gets to running not even Santano's wolves could follow them in this chaparral."

"You speak what is most apparent, Señor El Zorro," said Lazaro softly. "Please go on."

"I only wanted you to see, Lazaro, that Thurber has dealt you a hand from the bottom of the deck. Did he not promise you this herd without interference?"

Lazaro nodded, a smile of cruel speculation twitching his thin lips. His hand

had never moved from under the red sash.

"If I stampeded the herd here, like Thurber ordered, where would you be?"

"But the Senor El Zorro will not stampede the herd here. Did you not say yourself Santano is no f o o l? It is you, Señor Gringo, who is the fool. Quickly as you ride into the Señorita Daggett's camp you tell Santano why you are here, like any loose-tongued old woman."

"Thanks, Lazaro, for tolerating my company so long," said Crooknose dryly.

"Ah, but, Señor, with you we have b e e n playing . . . laughing up our sleeves that El Zorro is not a fox but the big fool. We laugh because the time come at last that we even the score with El Zorro in our own delightful way."

The Mexican's soft laugh, like the purr of a jaguar, made the flesh crawl. But Keough only laughed, too; a laugh tempered by menace.

"Lazaro, you are so slow-witted you are pitiful."

"Quiet words spoken carelessly. A draw so smooth and lightning swift that Lazaro was unaware of it until his enemy's Colt covered him. The segundo's smile was wiped away like magic. His eyes darted from weapon back to Keough's ruthless face. Lazaro's complexion faded, leaving it yellow.

"I thought, Lazaro Lame-brain, you had known me long enough to remember I meet a situation as it arises," mocked Crooknose.

"But no, Señor, Santano is not dumb," Lazaro forced between stiff lips. "In the chaparral, Señor. . . ."

"We kill Señor El Zorro unless he drops his guns pronto!" came the threat from the chaparral.

Keough's grin was bleak and cruel. His gun never wavered.

"If you want to gather up the guts of Lazaro, just start shooting, hombres." Then he cracked at his victim, "You, Santano, bring your hand out and bring it empty!"

Lazaro obeyed after the briefest hesitation. Keough's tone had the knell of death.

"Now tell your companeros to come out here and turn over their weapons."

Lazaro's hesitation was even briefer now. Two of the bandits came scrambling out of the chaparral at Lazaro's anxious order and dropped their rifles.

"All?" clipped Crooknose.

THEY assured him with pious vows that no others were hidden in the chaparral, but all were with the herd. Crooknose regarded the three with a malignant grin, addressing their chieftain.

"All right, Lazaro, but just remember, if any more are out there, I'll drill you into a sieve before they can get me." There was no reaction and so Crooknose concluded the brush was clear.

"Now listen to me, Lazaro. There will be no more foolishness. Thurber has double-crossed you. I'll drill that into your head if I have to do it with lead. He double-crossed Kate Daggett. There's good reason to believe he murdered her dad. But that doesn't concern you. I only want you to understand he's as low a buzzard as ever hit the desert country. I expect him to double-cross me . . . and that does concern you.

"How, Santano, do you ask? Most simple. When I do not stampede the herd here in the Espinal Hills as I am instructed, Thurber and his bunch will be upon Santano and his wolf-pack in such force as to quickly overwhelm them. I have already marked a dust-cloud far in our rear. If you look close, Lazaro, you can see it now."

The Mexicans turned their eyes southward with startled exclamations. They stared long and intently. When Lazaro again turned to Crooknose, there was uncertainty in his manner.

"That dust is raised by a considerable force, Lazaro. Thurber probably outnumbers you two to one. Besides they're all gun artists. Now, will you hear me?"

The Mexican nodded sullenly.

"Then listen! Turn the herd up the first coulee that comes from the east. Two miles more and you will enter Arroyo Blanca. The trail will be rough and narrow, but it deepens and widens, and runs out on Peno Divide.

"Now, Santano, this is what you and your pack must do. You will guard the mouth of Arroyo Blanca against Thurber entering. With two men and Señorita Daggett, I can handle the herd. You will take charge of the ones guarding Arroyo Blanca. With all but two

of your men, you can stand off a small army without much danger to your own hide. I will take charge of the herd until we reach Peno Divide. And I promise you we shall be there but shortly after dark."

"Ah, Senor, you are the fox!" Lazaro exclaimed, his black eyes glittering. "You do all this for Santano Lazaro? But no! You and I, we bear no love for one another. You, Señor El Zorro, would save the herd for Señorita Daggett, no?"

Keough's manner became savagely dangerous.

"Listen, Lazaro," he clipped, "the word of El Zorro is always made good, whether a promise of death or aid. This I promise you. . . . I will take the IXL herd to the place I say. I also gave my word to Señor Thurber that I would stampede the herd. This, too, will I keep. But mind you, Lazaro, on the Peno Divide will I stampede the herd, where the arroyos run toward the Rio Grande. All you need do is follow until the herd tires and they are yours."

"But the Señorita Daggett?"

"She does not enter into this bargain," snapped Crooknose.

"I will do as the Señor El Zorro suggests," agreed Lazaro, a tricky glitter in his black eyes.

KEOUGH didn't miss it but he ignored it. He had a trick or two up his own sleeve. He dismissed Lazaro with a wave of his hand, permitted his two henchmen to retrieve their rifles, and ordered them back to the herd.

"You know what to do, Lazaro," he said, as they started to ride away. "After the herd has entered Arroyo Blanca, you will take all your men but two, to guard the entrance."

Lazaro nodded. Keough sat his horse motionless as they rode away. After they had disappeared into the chaparral, he turned his regard once more to the distant dust cloud, his eyes pensive. For a crook, he thought, Thurber and his gunnies rode with small craft. Or was Thurber purposely advertising his approach? The thought startled Crooknose. He wheeled the palomino.

Keough had proposed to put on pressure and have the herd moved forward with all possible speed. But this he found unnecessary. Lazaro and his outfit were crowding the herd for all they were worth already. Crooknose saw Kate riding back from the pinnacle where he had sent her on a pretext. He rode to join her, because he knew the way the herd was being pushed had brought her back.

"What is it, Crooknose? Is something wrong?" She pointed down at the now running cattle.

"Ma'am. . . . Kate, I reckon things has come to such a head I got to tell you the facts," said Crooknose gravely. "See that dust cloud back yonder? Reckon that'll be Thurber and his gunnies. And down there. . . . Know who it is that's trailin' your herd? It's Santano Lazaro and his raiders."

Kate gasped; stared at him speechless. At last she found her voice.

"You knew this all the time, Crooknose?"

Keough nodded.

"I didn't want to fret you. Lazaro—Guerrera to you—has sort of been at loggerheads with me since we first met up. Some of his pack had the misfortune of crossin' my trail. . . ."

"Then that explains!" Kate regarded him with haggard face. "Crooknose . . . Dave . . . You mustn't stay here! They'll kill you. . . . "

"What about your herd?"

"The devil with the herd!" said Kate Daggett.

Crooknose stared at her in bewilderment. Her hand gripped his arm. Her eyes were frantic.

"You fool!" she cried. "Do you think that herd means as much as your life?"

"To me?" Crooknose was hardly aware that he spoke, he was so astounded to find someone concerned over his welfare.

"To me, you idiot!" admitted Kate violently. "Come on, let's ride!"

"Wait!" Crooknose was finding it hard to get his bearings. "I'm going to save your herd, Kate Daggett."

"You're not! You can't! You are only one against twelve! And I've heard a lot about Santano Lazaro and his raiders. . . . They're fiends!" She grabbed his rein. "Will you ride?"

"Now wait up a minute, Kate!" He caught her hand and held it. Its touch sent an unaccustomed thrill through him. "You got me plumb befuddled. Am I to understand you're concerned

on my account?"

Kate bit her underlip to hide its trembling.

"Do I have to propose to make you understand? We Daggetts admire a *man*. My mother admired a *man* so much she married him." She controlled herself with an effort. "Well, now, you've made me utterly shameless. *Will you ride?*"

Crooknose shook his head. He spoke very gently. He couldn't remember when he had ever felt so gentle.

"No, Kate. You've got to understand me. Lazaro and I have come to an understanding. Now . . ."

"An understanding! *You . . . And Lazaro . . .*"

Keough grinned.

"That stumps you? Well, don't you bother your pretty head about it. . . . . Just trust me, Kate. The Mexicans all call me El Zorro." His grin broadened. Kate's look was blank. "The Fox," he explained, chuckling.

Kate found herself smiling. The Fox! She thought she understood. She couldn't doubt Dave's ability to match trickery with trickery. He was *smart*. Anyone outwitting him would have to sit up nights! . . . And then they would have to be more than ordinary brainclever. She was swept with a new confidence.

"And the danger?" she asked.

"The danger," Crooknose assured, "don't amount to that!" snapping his fingers. "Come on, Kate, let's ride while I tell you the rest."

CHAPTER VI

Cross and Doublecross

ARROYO BLANCA runs narrow and deep into the Espinal Hills. Chaparral and mesquite, octilla and Spanish dagger in a gnarled and stunted thicket grows to the brink of its abrupt sides. A field of boulders and projecting rock is its bed, making a difficult and hazardous trail.

Once Arroyo Blanca is entered there is no way out except to follow it to its head, the Peno Divide, or return by the way of entrance. There is a network of side arroyos emptying into Arroyo Blanca from the Espinal Hills, but these are invariably blind coulees, offering no outlet.

Yet these side-arroyos needed guarding against the herd entering, because of the loss of time involved in driving them back into the main arroyo.

The sun's rays slanted low as Kate Daggett's herd was shoved into Arroyo Blanca. As they ascended, and the slopes of Arroyo Blanca grew steeper, the shadows grew longer. Escape from the burning heat of the desert was a relief to both men and beasts.

Kate and Crooknose rode the lead, taking turns guarding the side-arroyos, while the two Mexicans brought up the drag. Santano Lazaro and the balance of his cohorts concealed their horses and themselves behind the fort-like jungle of boulders to await the arrival of Thurber's force.

Keough had told Kate about Humpy Lewis and the second herd, and how he planned to switch herds on Lazaro and Thurber. Kate could hardly control her glee. Her praise of his cleverness was sweet music to his ears as well as embarrassing.

But later Keough worried. He wondered if maybe he hadn't been a little premature in spilling all he knew to Kate. Without later word from his friend, he had no assurance Humpy had been able to fill his part of the contract.

Leaving Kate on guard at one of the side-arroyos, Keough rode ahead. He rode some distance before finding another coulee he deemed necessary to guard. Concluding he had time on his hands before the lead arrived, he lifted his palomino into a gallop and headed on up Arroyo Blanca.

HE WAS not too familiar with the ground and he was not certain just how far it was to the East Fork. But in ten or fifteen minutes he became aware of movement ahead.

Keough's pulse leaped as he caught sight of several riders waiting at the mouth of the East Fork. One of the figures swung to saddle and rode forward to meet him. Crooknose would have recognized that figure among a

million. Humpy Lewis and Keough clasped hands briefly.

"You got 'em?"

"We got 'em, you bet your life," chuckled Humpy.

He cut a grotesque picture in the saddle. His humped over figure was like a hovering vulture of prey. His sharp, seamed features and long beak of a nose strengthened the impression. But Keough knew the picture was wrong.

Humpy liked his joke, and he was human, very human.

"What the devil you tryin' to do to me, pard? Gatherin' another man's dogies without his say-so! You want to stretch hemp?"

"Aw, go off and lay down, you old fraud! If you think Thurber is going to honor you with a necktie party, he's going to be too busy. Where are they?"

"We're holdin' 'em up here in Arroyo Blanca. But we didn't only get about a thousand head, Dave. Didn't have time. . . ."

"That's a-plenty. Strung out like they got to be, nobody's a-going to be the wiser. Then it'll soon be dark anyway."

"We figgered on bending your herd into East Fork here and holdin' 'em. There's water and there's grass," said Humpy.

"Swell! They need both. We been crowdin' 'em hard. Don't reckon a man could stampede 'em if he wanted to."

"Well, you won't have no trouble spookin' *this* bunch. They're salty. How many rogues has Santano got in his crew?

"Twelve," said Keough, "including the cook. He's with the mess-wagon, and of course has gone around by the regular trail to Peno Divide. All but two of the rest are standing guard over the mouth of Arroyo Blanca, including Santano Lazaro. Thurber is hot on our trail. Santano's two men are bringing up the drag."

"Thurber! And you got Santano fightin' him off?" Humpy suddenly doubled up with mirth. "Dave, you ain't changed a little bit!" he gasped, and went off into another convulsion.

"But, say, how you a-goin' to keep them two Mexes from knowin' when we switch herds?" Humpy finally controlled himself sufficiently to ask.

"I'll take care of them," promised Keough. "You just take care of this end."

"Leave it to us," agreed Lewis.

"And make yourself scarce in case Santano and some of his men show up with me."

"Don't we get to burn no powder?" Lewis inquired anxiously.

"You've reformed," Crooknose reminded. "Humpy, you're an old and decrepit has-been. You still have some ambitious ideas, seems like, but they're anti-dated. . . ."

"You're a liar!" snorted Humpy indignantly. "I can . . ."

"The fighting," continued Keough, "will be confined to them as know how. There'll be some blood-letting."

"Why, blast you. . . ."

"That would sicken you. Why, I'll bet right now the sight of a few drops of blood would turn your guts wrong side out."

"LISTEN, you pie-eyed . . ." Lewis fumed helplessly as Keough laughed tauntingly and whirled his palomino. He flung back over his shoulder a last word.

"Kate Daggett will be along with her herd, Humpy, and I want you to take right good care of her."

"Oh, you do, hey? You say that like —like—" Humpy sought for words that would pay back Keough's insult. *"—like you was in love with her."* Now, thought Humpy, chuckling, he had Dave paid back!

Keough reined up for a minute. Humpy saw him looking back.

"I am," said Crooknose softly. But Humpy heard him. His mouth fell open. "I been kind-a thinkin' of reformin' and settlin' down my ownself, Humpy." Crooknose turned his horse and rode back. Never before had Humpy seen his face so grave. He stared in wonder.

"She's an angel, Humpy. And I got so much reforming to do before I could marry her, it scares me. I'm afraid I'll die of old age. . . ."

"Thunder!" exploded Humpy. "You can do 'er, Dave. You ain't so bad as you were. Just quit your hellin' with cards and guns . . . and any woman can be proud to take you!"

"I'm a man of my word, ain't I, Humpy?" Keough's eyes bored into him.

"To the letter," agreed Lewis with feeling. "I never saw a man your beat. Why, I've seen you jeopardize your life time and again. . . ."

Keough silenced him with a gesture.

"We won't go into details. I just wanted to say, Humpy, I took Thurber's dirty money to stampede an IXL herd. The issue was more or less forced onto me, but I *took* his money and I agreed. All right, I stampede the herd for Thurber. And I stampede 'em south of Peno Divide, because that's what I promised Santano Lazaro."

He was silent for a moment.

"It's a cinch Thurber ain't going to profit. I don't aim he should. And I doubt if Santano lives to profit. If Thurber and Lazaro don't take care of each other. . . ." He gave a short laugh. "That's just another promise I made, Humpy."

Humpy understood, and nodded. He understood, too, that Keough hadn't finished, and remained attentive.

"About Kate," said Crooknose musingly. "She never asked me for a single promise, Humpy. Guess she just sort of took me for granted. Great girl. . . ."

"*Smart* girl," muttered Humpy.

"Told me she thought Thurber had dry-gulched her dad. So I just made myself some promises, Humpy, about her herd . . . and Thurber."

KATE was tired. The heat, the punishing trail, the strain and the reaction from Keough's revelation, left her with a weariness that dulled her mind. Crooknose found her at the mouth of the coulee that he should have been guarding.

"It won't be long now, Kate," said he very gently, letting his hand rest for a minute on her hand gripping the reins. "East Fork is only a jump farther, and Humpy is waiting there with his crew and the other herd. Humpy will feed you, and then you hit the hay. I'm ridin' back to the drag to see how it's a-comin'."

He was gone before she could attempt to reply.

The drag wallowed forward in a stifling cloud of dust. Crooknose fought his way through the packed bodies with the end of his hard-twist, then rode his palomino clear of the dust. He looked back, and was barely able to discern the two Mexicans, their heads bent against the suffocating cloud floating back upon them.

"Hombres, come here, pronto!"

At his hail the Mexicans swung their mounts about in comical confusion. But there was nothing humorous about the way they reached for their weapons. They saw Crooknose sitting carelessly in his saddle, his hands resting lightly on the pommel, in a hearkening attitude. After a quick exchange of glances, they rode back.

"Quien es, Senor?"

Keough held up his hand.

"Listen."

Only the clicking of hooves and the labored snuffling of the drag struck upon their ears.

"I thought I heard shots," muttered Crooknose. Then while he was trying to devise a new pretext to get rid of the two, they heard shooting in reality. The rattle of shots came faint and indistinct, but unmistakable.

"I hear it now . . . much shooting!" declared one of the Mexicans excitedly.

"Si! Bravo, Santano! It is the Senor Thurber and his carrion! Ah, what a battle we miss, Luiz!" lamented the other.

Keough smiled behind his hand, exulting in the break thus given him.

"Senors, you must ride back," he ordered brusquely. "See how your leader, Santano, is faring. Pronto! Senorita Daggett and I will push the herd forward with all possible speed."

The two needed no further urging. The prospect of getting into a fight made them forget that El Zorro was their enemy as well, and as full of tricks as a Mexican cur of fleas. Keough regarded their departure with a saturnine grin. Then, as they faded into the gloom, he turned his palomino around and rode swiftly after the drag.

"Senor El Zorro!"

Keough's right hand whipped swiftly to his Colt as he twisted his head. Then he laughed softly. Out of the shadows limped Apache Joe, his clothes all but torn from his body, his face dirt streaked. Crooknose lifted his eyes upward and saw the horse standing there at the brink where José had descended. His eyes jerked back to the Indian.

"Amigo, six men, and one is Senor Thurber, ride swiftly toward the head of Arroyo Blanca!"

Keough regarded the Indian silently. He finally nodded.

"Gracias, José. I figured Thurber had an ace up his sleeve. He's riding up there, expecting to stop the herd while his men keep Lazaro engaged down at the other end of Arroyo Blanca." A ruthless glitter flickered in his eyes. "Let Thurber have it, José. If he can stop this herd, he's welcome to it."

But there was no further time to lose. Crooknose ordered José to help him with the drag. They prodded the weary animals forward with all possible speed, José on foot, and Keough dashing into the surging bodies with yells and singing hard-twist.

Humpy knew something was up. Leaving half his crew to bend the herd into East Fork, he rode with the rest to Keough's aid. In few words Keough told of Thurber's trick.

"Take over here, Humpy," said Crooknose. "Thurber is probably up there now, snortin' and stampin'. I don't want to keep him waiting. . . . I'm going to dump that herd right in his lap."

CHAPTER VII

The Ethics of Crooknose

WHEN Humpy had stated that his herd was spooky, he had put it mildly. As Crooknose rode upon them, they came to their feet with a startled bellow. Night was now descending into the arroyo, but Crooknose could distinguish the sea of bobbing heads and hear the clack of horns.

A wicked smile crossed his homely features as he drew his Colt. Behind him the last of Kate Daggett's herd was disappearing into East Fork. He cocked his head for an instant. Far back down the arroyo he heard the clatter of hooves. That would be Santano Lazaro and part of his pack.

Keough had anticipated that when his two men joined him, Santano would know at once that Crooknose was up to some trickery and would lose no time getting on his trail.

"Well, here they come, Thurber!" he chuckled, and started his Colts blazing. Orange streaks of flame leaped out over the swaying backs. There was a momentary rearing and plunging of bodies. Then the floodgates of hell were raised and the arroyo was filled with the roar of thundering hooves.

Crooknose followed, reloading his guns as soon as they were empty, and emptying them again over the backs of the fleeing herd. He was at the head of the arroyo before he was hardly aware of it, into a scattering growth of scrub oak and juniper. He became aware, too, that he was no longer alone.

A wild hubbub of slithering hooves, frantic yells and crashing shots struck upon his ears. He laughed aloud and reined up his palomino. The wild brush-cattle were headed straight for the south arroyos, despite the frantic efforts to turn them.

Keough had dropped them in Thurber's lap, all right; the thing was wholly unexpected. Thurber had expected a tired herd, benignly amenable after all the hard pushing. He was caught wholly unprepared, and the surprise demoralized him.

Crooknose saw a rider pull up on a knoll looking down upon the network of Rio Grande drainage, a mad array of brakes into which the herd was disappearing. The fellow cut loose with a string of savage oaths and swung down from his horse to stand and stare after the vanishing cattle.

Crooknose trotted his horse toward the knoll, his lips curving in his ruthless smile. The grass-softened pad of the palomino's hoofs aroused Thurber.

"Now what in the—" He stopped suddenly as he twisted his head around. His hand stabbed towards his gun and stopped. "You!"

Keough dismounted carefully, keeping his eyes on Thurber.

"You've changed some, Thurber," he said. "'Pears like you've shaved off that fancy moustache you was sportin' back when we first met. And this time you haven't got a gunny planted in the brush."

His eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"Now why should you shave off your moustache? Couldn't be you was figuring on denyin' that you ever made a deal with either Santano or me, an' figured

this would confuse things just enough to get us milling?"

He saw by the reaction in the man's eyes that his shot had struck close to home, and he chuckled dryly.

"Did I fill my bargain?" he asked.

Thurber's fingers tightened about the butt of his Colt. He slanted anxious glances about, hoping that some of his men would be returning. But apparently the fools were still in hopeless pursuit of the herd.

"You stampeded the cattle all right enough," he said with unwonted feeling. "But I said the Espinal Hills! This is Peno Divide!"

"Now, how could I have got my geography mixed up like that?" mocked Crooknose.

Thurber, however, was not deceived. Under the heckling tone was a note of threat that he recognized.

"By the way, Thurber, why did you quit the Mesa Verde country so suddenly?" Keough abruptly changed the subject.

Thurber gave a violent start. He stared at Crooknose with sagging jaw.

"You must be one bad shot," Keough went on, "that you can't plug a man fatal even from the brush. Reckon I was foolish givin' you the benefit of the doubt when you had *me* covered."

"What in time you talkin' about?" blustered Thurber.

Crooknose shrugged a shoulder.

"Oh, sure, Daggett died, but not before he talked."

"You're a liar! I . . ." Thurber stopped suddenly, conscious of what he was saying.

"You made sure before you rode away, did you, Thurber?" Keough laughed without mirth.

They glared at each other there in the dusk, Thurber wondering if he could muster the fraction of speed he needed to beat Crooknose to the draw.

Keough watched him like a hawk, praying Thurber would have enough guts, his own hands hanging lightly at his sides. And then Thurber suddenly stiffened, a new hope lighting his face.

Keough heard the hoof-beats, too, but knew they were approaching from the wrong direction to be Thurber's gunhawks. That would more than likely be Lazaro and some of his pack. Silhouetted there on the knoll against a rising moon, they were instantly spotted by the approaching riders. Lazaro and four of his cohorts drew up, the moonlight glittering on their ready weapons.

"Ah, Senors, what a meeting!" ejaculated Santano softly, his black eyes glittering, a smile of satisfaction and malice on his thin, dark features. "I was seeking Senor El Zorro, and here I find both Senor El Zorro and Senor Thurber. The gods of good fortune are surely with me this night!"

Crooknose again flashed his brilliant, mirthless smile, for he reveled in such situations. Thurber's growl might have been the signal. The lips of Crooknose drew back over his teeth in a tight grin. His head lifted and his eyes squinted. He drew a quick breath.

What happened after that happened so fast the human eye refused to photograph the action. He caught a gesture. . . . Thurber's quick, stabbing lunge for his Colt.

Crooknose leaped forward, was a

"I'll Shoot Sheriff Burt Travis If It's the Last Thing I Do!"

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blurring image as his guns belched flame and destruction. He lunged this way and that. Men went down like reeds with their own weapons flashing. Crooknose whirled on Santano and his wolves in a hungry rush and his guns flashed again with the same blurring velocity.

A stabbing something struck him powerfully in the chest. He felt himself spinning backwards, saw the darkness close in on him.

Crooknose regained his senses amid a hubbub of voices. Yes, that was Humpy talking, roaring orders, exclaiming his wonder, there were the softer tones of Apache Joe.

"The soul of Santano Lazaro is now burning in purgatory."

"Yeah, and he got Thurber, too," affirmed Humpy. "He'll never be deader. . . . And two of Santano's men. . . . The fighting hellion!"

Was it raining? His head was pillowed on something soft. The something soft was Kate Daggett's lap, he discovered. He pinched himself to see if he was dreaming, and as he looked up, her tear-wet face was pressed against his.

"Now if I reform . . ." he whispered, his fingers gripping her hands with a strength that assured Kate he was not dying.

"I see it takes more than a bullet in the chest to kill you," breathed Kate against his cheek.

Humpy paused long enough in his inventory to regard them. His eyes twinkled.

Unconsciously he pulled his long, thin nose with a thumb and first finger.

"Another wild mustang has been roped, busted and hogtied," he confided to the ozone.

●

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HERITAGE PAID IN LEAD

By MEL PITZER

The Sonora Kid Flees into the Night with the Law on His Heels—and Meets a Strange Justice Below the Rio Grande!

Chuck toppled backward, a knife in his heart

THE oil lamps flung out a yellow wavering glow into the smoke-filled bar-room. Range-garbed punchers lined the timber and the clink of their glasses and hum of voices drowned out the soft slap and swish of the cards at the two tables by the far wall.

At one of these tables sat four men playing poker. Three were cowmen, but the fourth, with his coffee-brown handsome face, sleek black hair and flashing mustachioed smile, was undoubtedly Spanish or Mexican. In fact, he was the famous Sonora Kid. The Kid was wanted in a dozen states for rustling, but he was far north for the first time and felt safe up here in the mountains.

A brown paper cigarette drooped from his mouth and his dark flashing eyes were narrowed with concentration as he dealt out a hand. He had just picked up his pasteboards when a voice blasted at him from the dimness at the rear of the room.

"Stick 'em up, Sonora!" The Kid didn't even turn. His lithe body suddenly followed the chair he had pushed over and he rolled to the floor. A gun slid magically into his hand and a shot winged out even before he sprang to his feet. The fellow behind him cried out, and the gun he held roared and ripped a slug into the ceiling.

By now the Sonora Kid had bounded toward an open window. His challenger was holding his gun-hand, for the Kid never shot to kill. A gleaming star on the man's vest showed him to be a lawman, and he began now to call for a posse to find the rustler who had been blotted out by the night.

Fifteen minutes later ten sturdy men were mounting and ready to cut the Kid's trail. But it would do them no

good. The Sonora Kid had jumped the first horse he had come across and had ridden hell-bent out of town.

The whistle of a fast Sante Fe freight had split the warm night air a quarter of a mile away, and a bit later, Sonora had leaped from his commandeered mustang into the musty warmth of an empty box car. Little did Sonora realize that this ride was the start of an experience that would erase the name of the Sonora Kid from the West for all time.

Sonora rode his iron trail ceaselessly all that night, the next day and another night. He never felt the need of food or water when he was putting miles between himself and the law. At one point he deliberately turned directly away from his destination, for no doubt all the northern sheriffs would be on the lookout for him. He was headed for the Rio Grande country.

A WEEK later the Sonora Kid was sitting in a small cantina on the Mexican side of the border. He was sipping a glass of red wine and staring through the window at two dusty horsemen who had ridden up to the hitching-post nearby.

Dismounting, they entered the cantina. They rubbed their eyes against the gloom of the room, and slouched down at a table ordering frijoles and wine. At last one glanced over and saw the Kid. He gave a sudden shout of recognition.

"Hey, Sonora, how are yuh, old son? Lookit, Joe, if it ain't the Sonora Kid himself sittin' there."

"It's him all right, Chuck."

Chuck, a squat, bandy-legged fellow with a crooked jaw and small, close-set eyes, grinned. Jumping up, he went over to the Sonora Kid.

"Hiya, Kid, long time no see," he greeted.

The other one, known as Joe, looked at the Kid over his long hooked nose, and followed his partner to the Kid's table.

"Yuh're a sight for sore eyes, Kid," he mumbled, "what yuh been doing?"

The Kid smiled with a flash of white teeth, but his eyes had grown smoky. He had worked with these two on several small jobs; in fact, it was this pair that had broken him into the rustling game. But once Chuck Elton and Joe Brody had left the Sonora Kid when they were being chased and a lucky shot from a posse had wounded the Kid in the leg causing him to fall off his horse. He had managed to crawl to a small stream bordered by tules and had lain hidden there for two days. He finally made a deserted line camp and remained there until his wound healed, living on berries and a wild rabbit he could knock over once in a while. He hadn't seen Chuck Elton or Joe Brody since that time a year ago.

Chuck's face grew serious as he spoke again.

"Kid, me an' Joe here are really glad to see yuh—and that's no lie. Yuh maybe have got it in for us for what happened that night a year ago when we left yuh and made our own getaway. But it was dark, Kid, an' we thought all the time yuh were still ridin' behind us or had struck out for yourself to take them gents off our trail. We circled back later an' couldn't find yuh anywhere an' we ain't seen yuh since. That's the honest truth, ain't it, Joe?"

Joe Brody nodded solemnly. "It was that way, Kid," he said.

Sonora waved a slender powerful hand. "Well, forget it, gents," he answered. "That was a year ago. I got my idea of the story, and you have yores."

"I'm glad yuh feel all right about it," grinned Joe.

Chuck Elton had leaned forward now like a dog on a scent.

"Kid," he said, lowering his voice, "if yuh think we left yuh to the coyotes that time, we got somethin' now that we'll cut yuh in on to make up for it. The biggest thing yuh ever struck, Sonora.

"One thing about yuh, Kid, if y' hear something y' don't like or it don't agree with you, y' don't open yore trap about it. So listen while I do a little talkin'."

Sonora could see that the two were fairly quivering with excitement and anything he knew that could break the hard shell of these two renegades must be worthwhile.

"I'm listening," he said.

"All right, Kid," went on Chuck, "here it is. Me an' Joe have been crackin' safes across the Rio until it got too hot for us. We come to Mexico to lay low an' while we were here we decided to ride around an' see what was doin' in

parts we were never to before.

"Well, we come to a town one hundred miles from here, Kid, an' there we found the golden egg, yuh might say. It's ready to be cracked an' the gold taken out an' it's you we want to do the crackin' an' the takin', Kid."

Chuck in his excitement turned to his crony.

"What about it, Brody. What about that little business we figured out that would put us on easy street. Ain't we been watchin' an' tryin' every day to fill the hero's shoes; ain't we failed until now. An' what happens? Why, the Sonora Kid steps right in to take the part. An' he can speak Spanish better than the American lingo, which makes it a hundred per cent. You tell him, Joe. Tell the Kid what we're shootin' at."

Brody scratched his beaklike nose with one grimy finger and gazed thoughtfully at Sonora. Then he said, slowly:

"There's a hundred thousand in it for us, Kid."

Sonora had been making a brown paper cigarette as he listened, and now the tobacco spilled and his hand trembled and he showed the first flicker of interest.

"A hundred thousand!" he said, huskily.

CHUCK nudged his partner, as he grinned.

"See, Joe, them figgers can even make the Sonora Kid a little sick." His eyes stabbed around the room, but at this hour there was no one in the place, even the fat, oily-faced bartender had retired to a back room for his siesta. So Chuck got up and slid into the chair next to the Kid and his voice dropped to nothing, as he went on:

"Sonora, I'm gonna tell yuh the whole thing, an' when I finish you can give us a yes or no. Either way there's no harm done, 'cause, as I said before, we know that yuh're the kind that will keep his trap shut. But me an' Joe wanna make up to yuh for that other business we figger yuh got against us."

Joe Brody shook his head.

"Yeah, we don't think yuh'll let this slip through yore fingers, Sonora. Go on, tell him, Chuck."

"As I said we come into this next town about one hundred miles from here," Elton continued, "an' stop at a place like this. There's two Mex sheep-shearers at the bar who were talkin' kinda loud, 'cause they was pretty well filled with *tequila*.

"Seems that the one shearer wants the other to speak to his ranch manager an' get him a job at the place he's workin'. The other one says that he might get him a job but that he wants too much money. Then this first wooley stripper says that he can shear faster than anybody else an' he's worth plenty more."

Chuck stopped now and stared closely at the Sonora Kid. But the latter's face showed no expression of any kind. Chuck winked at his crony.

"The Kid is bored, Joe," he said, "but wait'll he hears the finish."

"Anyway," he went on, "this Mex that wants a job says that Don Elba can pay his price, 'cause everybody knows that the Don has got plenty of dinero. In fact, he carries a hundred thousand dollars in cash in a safe in his house 'cause he don't believe in banks.

"The fella who works at the ranch admits this, but says ever since the Don lost his small son years ago, he leaves all the hirin' an' payin' to the ranch manager an' that's the hombre who won't pay the higher price no matter how fast a gent can yank the wool off a sheep.

"Well, Kid, by this time me an' Joe pulls our freight 'cause we don't give a dingo about who got what job. But ridin' along, I gets an idea. Why not find a son, call him Don Jose Elba, like the guy back in the cantina said his name was, and then get him into the Don's house long enough to walk out with the hundred thousand."

Chuck stopped, waiting to see how Sonora had taken his story up to that point. The Kid seemed to be hanging on every word, so the plotter continued.

"The more we thought about it the better it tasted. So we decide to stay around an' find out all about the Elba family. Well, what them Mexes didn't know for a silver dollar they'd make up, an' soon we knew everything."

"Anyways," broke in Joe Brody now, "we found out that the Don's son was about ten years old the day he strolled away from the ranch an' it seems got lost an' was never found since. Yuh beginnin' to get the idea now, Kid? Yuh're gonna be the long-lost son, an' when

yuh're there a month, or even sooner, yuh ought to be able to have the combination of that safe an' step out with what's in it."

They sat back now watching Sonora's face. There was a bright glitter in his eyes, as he nodded at them. "It sounds to me, gents, like a good thing," he said. "Count me in on it."

"We knew yuh'd see it that way," chuckled Elton.

"Yeah, yuh won't regret comin' in with us on it," added Brody.

Then Chuck added something else.

"The Don's young son could be identified by a scar on the outer part of his forearm, Sonora. It was a half-moon, about three inches long, where the kid had been tossed from a pony into a barb-wire fence. I'll have to use a knife, Kid, an' make that scar on yore arm."

Sonora's head jerked up and his eyes widened. "A scar!" he said. Then he shrugged his broad shoulders, took a long drag on a cigarette and relaxed once more.

Here Joe Brody slapped a hand on the table.

"Hey, Chuck," he groaned, "we forgot to find out what arm it was."

"Danged if yuh ain't right," growled Chuck. "What're we gonna do?"

"One arm's as good as another is what I say," came from the Sonora Kid. "When the years go by everybody forgets and ain't sure of things like that."

The others admitted this was true, and went ahead with their plans. The first thing they decided to do was to make a camp a mile or so from the town where no spying eyes could watch them. Here, the following morning, the Kid rolled up the shirt sleeve of his left arm and Chuck cut a crude half-moon on his fore-arm with a bowie-knife. Then the wound was washed and tied up.

THE following day they started toward Don Castrona Elba's sheep ranch, and a few days later they made another camp on the brow of a hill among some chaparral. From here they could see the sprawling adobe ranch building that was their destination.

The Sonora Kid's wound had left a scar which Chuck and Joe agreed would pass the test. But the Sonora Kid, strangely, didn't seem to show much interest in whether it would or not.

It was a bright clear morning when the Kid took his departure, telling Chuck and Joe that he would meet them at this same place as soon as he had anything of importance to tell them.

A day passed. A second and a third. It was during the afternoon of the fourth day that the Sonora Kid rode into the hideout. His face was grim and his eyes had that smoky look about them. A brown paper cigarette hung from his lips. Slowly he dismounted and leaned against the saddle.

Chuck Elton and Joe Brody had been sitting under the brush leanto they had built. Now they jumped up with shouts of greeting which died suddenly when they saw the expression on the Kid's face.

"Well," said Chuck, "what yuh got such a sour look for, Kid? Did yuh see the Don? Did him an' the Missus take yuh in with open arms?"

"Everything went off as we planned it," said Sonora. "I even saw the safe and the stacks of money inside of it. In fact, I was the honored guest with a key to the city."

"Well, why didn't yuh grab the swag and cut for it then?" growled Joe Brody, darkly.

"Yeah, why didn't yuh do that?" challenged Chuck.

"I ain't going through with it, boys," said the Sonora Kid, as he stepped away from his horse.

"You ain't what?" thundered Chuck Elton. "He says he ain't goin' through with it, Joe. Did yuh hear him?"

Joe Brody's face began to darken with rage. "Yuh ain't thinkin' of double-crossin' us, are yuh, Sonora?" he purred.

"I ain't double-crossing anybody," ground out the Kid with a sudden savageness. "I fell in with yore game because I wanted to see what the end would be. I found out that everything yuh said was true and I learned a few other things that I didn't know until now which you gents will never know. I'm out of the game and so are the both of yuh."

"So we're out of the game, are we?" roared Joe Brody now, and one claw-fingered hand began to move toward his holstered gun.

"I'll tell yuh what his game is," shouted Chuck. "He took the money and the sight of it made him decide he'd

keep it all. He don't want to give us our cut, Joe. He's turnin' into a dirty double-crosser, like yuh said."

Chuck was breathing hoarsely. "Kid," he went on, "throw the swag over by me here, do you hear it! Take it out from wherever you got it hid and toss it over here or yuh're a dead man."

A reckless smile touched the Sonora Kid's face. "Neither one of yuh know what yuh're talking about," he spat. "Yuh can both go to the devil!"

"Can we," shrieked Joe Brody, and with blurring speed his hand slid to his gun. Chuck Elton, with an oath followed that movement to his own Colt.

But faster than either of them, the Sonora Kid did two things. With his right hand he flipped out the stag-handled forty-five that rode low on his own hip, and with a speed that the eye could hardly follow his left hand darted to his neck and jerked out a throwing knife with a long thin blade.

The six-gun in his hand flamed twice, and Joe Brody was knocked backward and to the ground. At the same time the knife flew like a glittering streak of lightning towards Chuck Elton and sank more than half its length under his heart. This time the Sonora Kid made sure of his kill.

Chuck toppled backward to stretch out beside Joe Brody. Elton's eyes were bulging and with open mouth he was gasping for air. Sonora moved forward like an alert panther going in for the kill. A quick examination showed him that Brody was dead and Chuck, he knew, would be passing into the blackness of the Beyond very soon. But there was a viciousness that would live with Elton until his last breath.

"Yuh're a coyote, Sonora," he jerked out now.

"I didn't double-cross yuh," muttered Sonora. "I haven't got the money. I was playing as square as you and Joe ever did. But yuh both lost your head and figured to push me around."

"Prove that you wasn't a double-crosser," rasped the fast-dying man.

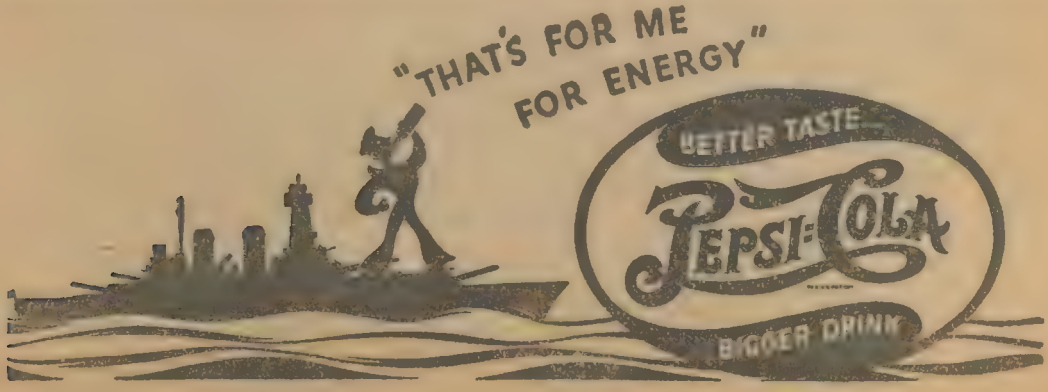
"I will," said the Kid, "and I'll see that yuh both get a decent burial 'cause yuh deserve that."

"Prove yuh wasn't a rat!" gurgled Chuck, his eyes beginning to film with death.

The Kid stepped up to him and, leaning, pulled up his *right* sleeve. There, on his forearm, showed a faint scar. It was a half-moon.

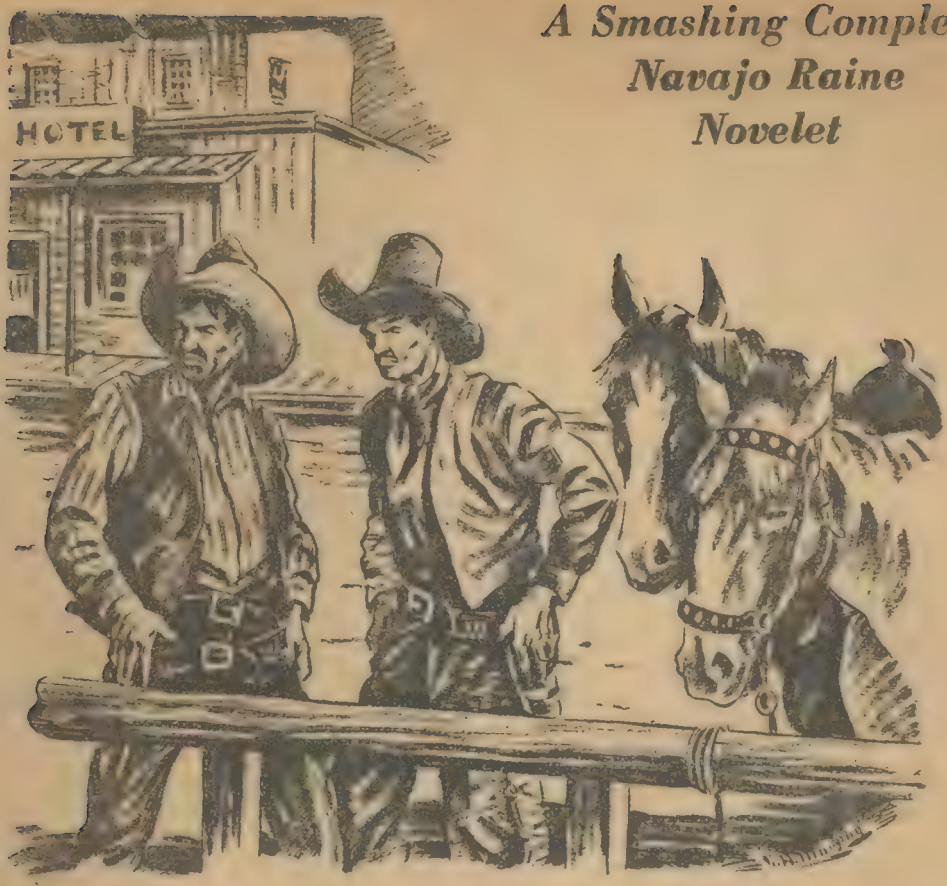
"This is the real scar, Chuck," he said, slowly. "The Sonora Kid is gone. I am Don Jose Elba. I was the boy that was lost."

Next Issue: Terry Bartron, Framed for Bank Robbery, Puts Up a Stirring Fight for Vindication in THE COWBOY FROM YUMA, *a Swift-Moving Action Novelet by Walker A. Tompkins*



Raine crossed over a right that smashed Bourke's head back

A Smashing Complete Navajo Raine Novelet



BOOTHILL BOUNTY

By JACKSON COLE

A Killer's "Front" of Camouflage Is No Protection Against the Ace of Arizona Rangers When a Battle for Justice Rages!

CHAPTER I

Lead Law

IT HAD been a trail of violence and bloodshed from the beginning. At first there had been the murdered guard outside the wall of Yuma prison, and "Navajo" Tom Raine, ace Arizona Ranger, had felt a surge of anger as he stared at the man's huddled body. A prison spoon, flattened and laboriously sharpened, had formed the weapon which had slashed the life out of the guard.

And then there had been the prospector sprawled out by the desert waterhole ninety miles east of Yuma. His head had been crushed by a vicious blow with a rock in Pete Clason's powerful hands.

Now there was a third. This time it was a Papago sheep-herder, scarcely more than a boy. The Indian hadn't been armed, but Pete Clason had taken no chances. The killer's bullet had caught the Papago just under the left shoulder blade, and blood was still worming out of that ragged hole.

It was a sight that sent cold fury through Navajo Raine, and at the same time gave him a hint of hidden danger close by. This murder wasn't more than a few minutes old, and Pete Clason couldn't have got very far away.

"Probably in that rock tangle across there," Raine muttered softly. "Captain

Mossman's telegram about that killer was right. Clason's as cagey as a coyote and as mean as a sidewinder."

He was a tall man, was Navajo Raine, and the deadly task of carrying Ranger law and justice through Arizona Territory was the work he had been cut out for. Violence and danger had been close to him as far back as his memory stretched.

Killer lead had smashed down his father, Marshal "Powder" Raine, during the bloody Tonto Basin War. Those same outlaw guns had driven young Tom, only twelve years old at the time, into the mountains for refuge.

He had never forgotten the friendly Navajos who had saved him from death by hunger and exposure. Oddly enough, he looked as if he had Navajo blood in his veins, a thing of which he was proud.

He wore his dark hair long, after the fashion of the Navajos, and his garb was a mixture of cowboy and Navajo—a buckskin jacket and flat-crowned hat, and a pair of heavy six-guns, the butts of which were inlaid with silver and turquoise.

RAINE now sat in the saddle of Wampum, his giant roan, and there was a coiled power in every line of his frame. He had wide shoulders and lean-whipped flanks, and green-flecked eyes glinted alert and cool from his dark face.

It was a naked, sun-hammered wasteland into which Pete Clason's murder trail had led. Here and there, half hidden by sage and chaparral, he could see the bobbing forms of the dead Indian's sheep. The ceaseless bleating of the animals was the only sound that broke the hush of the afternoon.

The sun was a glaring white disk beating down on the ranger's flat back, but if the sullen heat gave him any discomfort he did not show it. His thoughts were centered on the tangle of boulders half a mile to the east.

A lone killer could stand off a dozen lawmen in that granite out-cropping. The boulders saw-toothed the roof of a low hill, commanding slopes that were barren of any form of cover. Even as the Ranger studied the hill, he saw the dull glitter of sunlight on blued steel.

"All holed up and ready for the kill," he muttered.

It was a fight in which all the odds were in favor of the outlaw. The thought that he might close in on the killer under cover of darkness didn't strike the Arizona Ranger. While Navajo Raine could use an Indian's stoic patience when necessary, he was driven by a cold, inexorable energy when on the trail of an outlaw.

He had located Pete Clason, and his only thought now was to bring the man to justice as quickly as possible. Personal safety was of only minor importance, and it was this streak of recklessness that made Raine the most feared lawman in the Territory.

"We'll have to smoke him out, Wampum," Raine grunted finally.

The long-limbered roan shifted forward as if its rider's voice had been a command. Raine dropped into a barren draw that gouged a crooked path to the foot of the hill, and heat rolled against horse and rider as if from an open furnace.

Navajo halted his mount where the draw flattened out on the first pitch of the hill. The threat of impending violence seemed to squeeze all life out of the air. There was no sound to break the deadly, waiting hush.

Raine sent his thin-edged yell of warning climbing up the hill toward the granite out-cropping, a call he knew would be futile before he uttered it.

"Hey, you up there in the rocks—Pete Clason! This is Navajo Raine, Arizona Ranger, talkin'. Yuh're wanted for murder, Clason! Yuh givin' up, or do I come up after yuh?"

The killer's harsh laugh answered the lawman's ultimatum. "All yuh'll get up here is a hide full of lead, Ranger! Come on up, if yuh've got the nerve. The devil's got his gates open, and I'm the jasper to knock yuh through!"

It was a challenge, a threat that brought a glint of fury into Navajo Raine's eyes. Pete Clason would never surrender peacefully, but that gave the Arizona Ranger no surprise. He had known from the first that either he or Clason would die when they met.

Holed up in the rock tangle that crested the hill, the killer held all the advantage, but there was no fear in Navajo Raine as he weighed his chances. He didn't try to lay out a plan of action. There were only two moves he could make, turn back down the draw,

or try to smash his way into the killer's stronghold.

Hard-eyed, he slid his hands down and pulled his heavy guns, and there was a trace of bleak humor in his soft drawl.

"We don't want to be late for that polecat's party, Wampum. Let's go, boy!"

THE sheer recklessness of what he did caught the killer by surprise and gained the Ranger a dozen yards up the barren slope. Under the same circumstances, Pete Clason would have tried cunning, a murder shot from the protection of the draw, and that was what he had expected from Raine.

But Navajo's code had no room for dry-gulch fighting, and there was no cunning in the start of his attack. He simply bumped his heels against Wampum's flanks, and sent the giant roan plunging out of the draw and up the hill in a wild burst of speed.

Even as he hammered out into the open, he saw the killer crouching in the boulders that crowned the hill. Surprise showed on Clason's heavy face, then was swept away by a dark flare of fury. The outlaw's gun chopped down and roared.

The slug was like an invisible finger jerking at the collar of Navajo Raine's shirt. Pete Clason's hoarse yell of hatred pounded through the echoes of his shot.

"All right, blast yuh, yuh're askin' for this pay-off!"

Navajo Raine sheered his roan off at a sharp angle as the killer's weapon roared again, and then his own guns were crashing into life. He smashed his slugs into the rocks with deadly accuracy, grinned bleakly as the outlaw dived out of sight.

But he didn't silence his guns. He slammed lead into the boulders, and the sheer fury of his firing forced the killer to stay under cover.

Still shooting savagely, he reversed Wampum's direction to quarter the north face of the hill, knowing grimly that Clason would think he was still circling up the south slope.

He was throwing himself out of the saddle at the edge of the out-cropping when he saw the killer lunge into view, staring to the south. He heard Clason's hoarse shout of baffled rage, and laughed icily.

"This way, killer!" he mocked. He saw the outlaw spin as if jerked by a string, and called out a grim warning. "It ain't too late yet for yuh to throw down yore guns!"

The killer's answer was a shot that struck a boulder within inches of the

Ranger's face and went screaming into space. Navajo Raine ducked low, began threading his way through the rocks toward the killer, grim and inexorable.

He was like an Indian drifting through the rocks. Somewhere up ahead, he heard the metallic click of a gun hammer being eared to full cock, and it was a sound that told a grim story to the Arizona Ranger. The killer was nervous, and the dragging silence was straining him to the snapping point.

The faint smell of cigarette smoke halted Navajo Raine. He wet his finger with his tongue, and held it up. The slight chill on one side gave him the direction of the faint breeze—and the direction of Pete Clason's hideout. It was weather-beaten boulder a dozen yards ahead.

He stooped, picked up two rocks, sent them curving through the air in different directions. They landed on both sides of the boulder, and Clason's nervous gun smashed two quick shots at them.

Navajo Raine laughed tauntingly. "Yuh're jumpy, Clason. Better give up before it's too late."

A string of defiant curses answered him.

The Ranger's wide mouth thinned out, hardened. "Yuh've had yore chance, then!" he called out coldly. "I know where yuh're holed up. I'm circlin' around and comin' in on yuh from the other side."

AND Navajo Raine did just that! He had laid his plan open for the killer, and his deep-grained knowledge of Pete Clason's breed told him what to expect. Clason would lie and cheat to get what he wanted, and he would expect Raine's warning to be a lie to throw him off guard.

And when Navajo Raine drifted out of the rocks he saw the killer crouching behind the boulder, still facing where the Ranger had stood to throw the stones, both guns cocked and ready.

"Drop 'em, Clason!"

But Pete Clason was like a cornered wolf. The killer streak in him was too strong for any thought of surrender. He spun with deadly violence, and his guns were like living things, kicking and roaring in his hands.

Lead snarled past Navajo Raine, and he knew he had fired only by the shock of recoil against his bent elbows and by the thin gouts of dust that puffed from the front of the killer's shirt.

Clason's body jerked under the impact of smashing slugs. He rocked back against the boulder and stood pinned there by out-propped legs. A flicker of pain knifed his features, but not enough to rub out the harsh stamp of mad fury.

He fought to cling to his guns, but the heavy weapons slid out of loosening fingers. His knees buckled, and he skidded slowly down the boulder to the ground. He sat there swaying slightly, raw hatred in his glazing eyes.

Navajo Raine moved forward slowly, feeling that sharp twinge of bitterness that always came when he had been forced to kill.

He said, "Sorry, Clason. I didn't want it this way, but yuh had yore chance. More of a chance than yuh gave those two men back on the trail and that guard in Yuma. And when a man does murder, he's got tuh pay."

"Cut out the preachin'!" Pete Clason was an unrelenting killer and even approaching death couldn't soften him.

"Yuh want a smoke?" Navajo Raine asked softly.

Clason didn't have the strength to answer. He nodded shallowly, but as the Ranger reached for the makings, the killer's eyes drooped shut, and he was dead.

It took Navajo Raine an hour to gouge a shallow grave out of the rocky earth and bury the outlaw. He finished scooping the last dirt onto the long mound, and straightened, looking at the small collection of articles he had removed from the dead man's pockets.

There was a small piece of ore and three coins Clason had probably stolen from the prospector he had murdered. The small coil of rawhide thong and the jack-knife with the broken blade had no doubt belonged to the murdered Papago sheep-herder.

There was nothing to give the identity of a relative who could be notified of Clason's death. The outlaw's only personal possession was an empty envelope addressed to him at Yuma prison. The stamp had been removed, exposing a cryptic message: "Okay July 14."

Nothing more than that. Navajo Raine's eyes narrowed as he stared at the envelope. July fourteenth was the

day Pete Clason had made his prison break. Then Clason had had help from outside—the support of a man who had supplied the horse and canteens that had given the killer his initial start across the desert.

The letter had been mailed from Copper City, but there was nothing to hint the identity of the man who had sent it. Navajo Raine threaded his way through the rocks to his big roan and swung grimly into the saddle.

"Copper City is the next stop, Wampum," he said softly. "Our job is to find the polecat who helped Pete Clason start his murder trail."

CHAPTER II

King Copper

COPPER had made the town. Rich peacock ore, discovered low on the rust-colored canyon walls, had been the signal that started the first mad rush.

Letting his roan pick its own way down the snaky trail, Navajo Raine could picture each stage of the building of the mining camp.

First had come the prospector, and his discovery of eighteen percent ore had been a magnet for other prospectors and mine promoters. A village of tents had sprung up on the heat-soaked floor of the canyon, replaced by false-fronted frame buildings as merchandisers, blacksmiths, and freighters moved in.

The promise of easy riches had brought in the usual throngs of gamblers and gun-toughs. Saloons had sprung up, spreading the tentacles of evil to the four corners of the town, and there was always activity in the gambling halls and honkytonks.

Copper City was like a dozen other such towns that Navajo Raine had seen mushroom here and there through the Territory. Law was always forgotten in the rush of men for quick fortunes. Usually, what little law that might exist was a farce, working hand in hand with the outlaws.

Swinging in closer to the town, the Ranger could see and feel the intense activity of the camp. To the east, he could see the high columns of the smelter stacks, trailing out dark banners of smoke that was poisonous with sulfur fumes.

There was an iron car pouring flaring red slag down the edge of a waste dump; there was a big hoist grinding and grumbling near one of the nearer smelters. Tramcars rolled out of mine tunnels, loaded by sweating workmen mucking out after the ore had been blasted loose from the bowels of the mountain.

There were latticed gallows-frames scattered around the flanks of the town, and closer in was the glut of iron-roofed miners' shacks. Everywhere was the pall of acrid smoke settling into the canyon, and the poisonous fumes had killed off all vegetation until the town was like some wreckage left along the floor of the canyon by a cloudburst. Looking at it brought fine lines of distaste around Navajo Raine's mouth.

It was the same age-old story of quick riches warping the minds of honest men, making thieves and killers out of those with more flexible morals.

It was a town where copper was king, and the Colt was judge and jury.

The festering evil of the place touched Navajo Raine, as he swung his mount along the wheel-and-hoof-rutted street. The late afternoon sun was setting red behind the murk of smelter smoke, painting the town with an odd ruddy glow. The street was clogged with freight wagons and buckboards, and Cornish miners mingled with cowpunchers along the plank walks.

The saloons, even at this usually quiet hour, were brawlingly alive with scuffing boots and throaty voices, the brassy laughter of dance girls. The tinny piano of one saloon merged discordantly into the tinny piano of another as the Ranger threaded his roan through the crowd.

Somewhere a jubilant puncher let off the steam by slamming a shot at the clouds, but the crash of the gun was quickly throttled by the rumble of tramcars in the smelter, the occasional blasting of the powder monkeys in the mines.

RAINE dismounted in front of the frame building whose sign proclaimed it to be the post office and headquarters of the Copper City Express

Company.

He looped Wampum's reins around the hitch rail, and was turning toward the door of the post office when he felt the heavy shock of a man bumping into him. He stepped back, smiling genially.

"Sorry, pardner," he drawled.

The man had been coming out of the post office, and the power of a bull was in his thick shoulders and deep chest. His height was stunted by his breadth, his arms long and muscle-packed, his face square and flat. Cruelty showed in his small black eyes, and his mouth was a trap that barked out a savage oath.

The blare of his voice halted the traffic along the plank walk, and there was grim significance in the way the onlookers spread back to form a clearing. "Yuh blasted Injun! Next time get out in the gutter where yuh belong when yuh meet a white man."

Anger knifed through Navajo Raine. It wasn't the first time he had been mistaken for an Indian, a thing of which he was proud, but it rankled his temper when he heard the red race cursed. He knew white men had wronged the Indian far more than the Indian had ever wronged the whites.

"You better take another look, friend," he said quietly.

The big man kinked forward slightly, measuring Raine through narrowed eyes. He was accustomed to having men fear him, and the cool glint in Raine's steady gaze was a whip that lashed his anger.

"All right, then yuh're a half-breed!" he sneered.

Raine's smile was thin and tight. This was trouble, and although he didn't want it, he wouldn't run from it.

"If I had any Indian blood in me, I'd be proud of it, mister," he said coldly. "There's a lot yuh could learn from the Indians, friend—manners, for instance. Yuh bumped me on purpose, but if yuh want my apology for bein' on yore private walk, yuh got it. If yuh're usin' this for an excuse to make trouble, go on with yore fun. I'm still here to oblige you."

Surprise hit the big man's face; stunned alarm struck the onlookers, and one of them warned Raine in a smothered tone.

"You better pull that talk back, stranger. He's Jess Bourke!"

The name meant nothing to Navajo Raine, but the wicked heat that stabbed out of Bourke's small eyes was a story in itself.

Jess Bourke was one of the toughs who had been drawn to the boom town by the copper rush. He was a man who liked to bully and threat, and when he couldn't slug a man into submission he would use the heavy guns laced low around his thick middle. He liked trouble, and he showed it. He spat contemptuously, and there was a cruel glitter in his hot stare.

"Yuh'll wish yuh never saw this town, feller!" he rasped.

He plunged forward savagely, both fists slogging. He out-weighed the Ranger by thirty pounds, but Navajo Raine was like a swift-moving shadow. He slid to one side of Bourke's mad rush and his stabbing left carried a surprising jolt to the big man's jaw.

Bourke halted his rush, wheeled around, and Raine closed in on the man with the balanced speed of a huge cat. The lessons learned in half a hundred rough-and-tumble fights warned him against trying to match strength with the big man. He pumped his left out once, twice, forcing Bourke's head back, and then crossed his left with a shoulder-hammered right.

BOURKE took the blows without batting an eye and started another battering rush. Raine faded back swiftly, riding the balls of his feet, rolling and swaying away from the big man's roundarm swings.

His stabbing fists chopped Bourke's mouth raw and red, but he couldn't avoid all those smashing blows.

A fist caught him above his heart, and it seemed as if his chest had been caved in. He jumped back, and too late he heard a man's low cry of warning:

"Look out, stranger!"

From the corner of his eye he saw a short, thin-faced man close in behind him, stick out a boot that tripped him off balance. He fell heavily, saw Jess Bourke plunge down toward him in a murderous dive.

Instinct pulled his knees up to protect his stomach. Bourke crashed down on him with crushing force, and Raine threw all of his strength into the thrust of his legs that shoved the man off him.

He rolled to one side, and lurched to his feet, sucking air into aching lungs.

Bourke plunged up from the walk, snarling harshly. "I'm goin' to bust you in pieces, ra—" He broke off, and Raine's thoughts jumped. Had the man been about to say "Raine," "Ranger," or just "ranny"?

Understanding burned through the Ranger's mind. "He knows me! He's out to kill me!"

He drifted back, as Bourke started another savage charge. He saw the thin man slide in behind him to trip him again, but this time Raine was on guard.

He dodged to one side of Bourke's brute rush, and Bourke plowed into the thin man full on. The thin man went down, and Bourke wheeled around, his small eyes red-flecked with fury.

Bourke came in slower this time, and Navajo Raine forgot caution. He smashed toward Bourke in a headlong dive, rammed the point of his shoulder into the man's thick middle. He heard breath explode from Bourke's lungs, and the impact drove him back against the post office wall.

Raine pinned him there with savage blows to the heart and stomach, and for the first time saw pain in the man's eyes. Bourke tried to skid away along the wall, but Raine followed him inexorably. Fear whipped up the murder lust in the man's eyes, and he tried to grab out his gun.

Raine laughed harshly. "Yuh wanted this, Bourke," he rasped. "Take it, then!"

He smashed Bourke's hand away from his gun, and ripped a short curving blow to the heart. He didn't give the man a chance to get set, and Bourke's strength was fading fast.

And then as Bourke's guard dropped lower, Raine changed his attack. He lifted the man's jaw with a sharp left, and crossed over a right that smashed his head back against the post office wall. That was all he needed. Bourke slid to the ground as if his legs had been cut out from under him.

Navajo Raine whipped around on the crowd, his eyes cold and hard. "This jasper got any friends who want to carry this on?" he asked bleakly.

THERE was no reply to his challenge, but the slow turn of his glance told him Jess Bourke had plenty of friends in the crowd. There were saloon toughs and mine workers and punchers from neighboring ranches, and their faces were grimly expressionless as they met his stare.

Raine's smile was mocking, as he swung away from them and stalked into the post office. There were a few men inside, watching him with blunt curiosity, and a labor-gnarled old-timer moved toward him, chuckling his appreciation.

"My name's Paddy O'Keefe, sonny," he cackled, "and I reckon I'm the only man here with gumption enough to congratulate you for that job. As neat a piece of fist work as I've ever seen, it was, but by Judas, I never thought I'd see Jess Bourke polished off by a gent of yore size. Sure, and he didn't get no more than he had comin', neither!"

The oldster shoved out a horny hand, and Navajo Raine gripped it, grinning. The mail clerk uttered a nervous warning from his window.

"Paddy, won't you ever learn to keep a bridle on yore tongue."

Paddy O'Keefe snorted. "'Tis the weakness of me clan, havin' a loose tongue, and as long as it speaks the truth, by gorry, I'm goin' to keep it loose. Jess Bourke never saw the day he could beat fear into the likes of me, and he's tried it enough, ain't he?"

The oldster's Irish-blue eyes crinkled at Navajo Raine. "If it's ever a favor you're needin', sonny, ask it from Paddy O'Keefe. Yuh can have my pants any time yuh want them for the whoppin' yuh gave Jess Bourke." A grim glitter cooled his stare. "Only don't think you've seen the last of this. Jess Bourke is a sidewinder from heels to hat, and he won't forget what yuh done to him."

"Thanks, pardner."

The oldster moved away, and Navajo Raine drifted in to the mail window. Raine took the envelope he had found on Pete Clason's body out of his pocket, held it out to the clerk.

"I'm wonderin' if yuh could mebbe identify that hand writin'," he said quietly.

The mail clerk squinted at the envelope a minute, then shook his head slowly. "Mister, this is a boom town," he said drily. "I handle two thousand letters a day, comin' in and goin' out, and I ain't got much time to memorize who

they're comin' from and who they're goin' to."

Raine nodded expressionlessly. "Much obliged, anyhow," he drawled, but the mail clerk was already hurrying preparations for the incoming stage from Lordsburg.

The Ranger had known from the first that the chance of tracking down the envelope to its sender was as remote as finding water in a sand dune. The men of Copper City were too absorbed in their own personal problems to notice what was happening around them. They ignored the web of vice and lawlessness that was drawing around them until they got hurt; and when they yelled for help there was no one to listen to them.

Standing on the edge of the plank walk, Navajo Raine watched the throng roiling along the street—muckers, blasters, mine owners, promoters, gamblers, cattlemen—all hurrying about their own private business.

This was a replica of Virginia City and Placerville and every other money-mad town that had sprung into brawling life across the frontier. Finding the man who had helped Pete Clason escape from Yuma seemed a hopeless task. Raine doubted that the name and address on the envelope had even registered in the mind of the mail clerk.

"It ain't exactly a pretty sight, is it?" a voice asked suddenly.

NAVAJO RAINE slid a glance to the man who had moved up to his side. The man was slender and of medium height, and there was a trace of bitter tension around his eyes. Recognition pulled at the Ranger's thoughts.

"I reckon I owe you a vote of thanks, friend," he drawled. "Yuh're the one who tried tuh warn me when that skinny gent tripped me up durin' the fight."

The man smiled with grim irony. "Forget it," he said. "Two thirds of those lookin' on would have done the same thing if they'd been fool enough."

"Fool?" Navajo Raine pried quietly.

The man gave a short bitter laugh. "Anyone who takes sides against Jess Bourke's crowd is a fool. They don't usually stay healthy long when they buck Bourke. I've been waitin' for yuh to come out, stranger. I'm Tom Harker, superintendent of one of the mines up the hill."

The Ranger nodded without expression. "Call me Raine—Navajo Raine."

A sharp glint struck into Tom Harker's eyes. "A Territory Ranger? Then I want tuh talk with you more than ever. Where can we go?"

"You name it," Raine drawled.

The thick murk of evening was wrapping around the town, and Harker led down a darkening lane between the post office and saddle shop. He halted in a rubbish littered alley, and when he spoke his voice was grim and blunt.

"If you was anyone but Navajo Raine I'd warn yuh right now this is a killer game," he said harshly. "If you get in it, yuh may not get out alive."

The Ranger smiled thinly. "Let me worry about me," he said quietly.

Raine's eyes narrowed, thoughtful and bleak, as Tom Harker went on. "Like I said, I'm superintendent of a mine up on the hill—the Lady Hope. It ain't a big mine, but it'll be worth a fortune when we hit ore. Judith Nichols owns it, and has been tryin' to carry on since her father was killed."

By the flicker of expressions in the man's face, Navajo Raine knew Tom Harker's concern was deeper than that of a mine superintendent for his employer. Harker's anxiety stemmed from something stronger than mere loyalty.

"Killed?" Raine murmured.

"Murdered!" Tom Harker rasped. "Old Matt Nichols was too good a miner to be caught by the premature blast that killed him. That fuse had been cut off short so he wouldn't have a chance to get away. He was murdered."

"Who did it? Why?" Raine's voice was flat and cold.

"We don't know who lit that fuse. We thought we were near ore, and the whole outfit was in the tunnel, from Judy and the bookkeeper on down. Old Matt cut the fuse himself, and it was plenty long. But someone clipped the fuse off short, and it wasn't noticed. Matt told us all to clear out, and he lit the fuse himself—and was killed by the blast. But I know *why* he was murdered. The Lady Hope is worth plenty, and whoever killed Matt thought he could force Miss Judy to sell out. That's about tuh happen, too. Judy's scraped up her last payroll unless we hit ore soon. Mine fires, cave-ins, and a lot of accidents that weren't accidents have

pushed her to the wall. She'll be broke after she pays the men off tonight."

Raine asked quietly, "Where does Jess Bourke fit in this?"

Harker jerked his hand savagely. "If I knew I'd have gone after him myself," he rasped. "Bourke and his men don't want the mine, and I'd bet on that. Not unless they plan to sell it right off once they get it. They're out for quick money, hold-ups and crooked gambling layouts."

"Nice fellers," Navajo Raine drawled, but there was no humor in his tone.

The hunch that had haunted him since his fight with Jess Bourke had grown into a core of certainty. Bourke had recognized him from some other time and place, had hoped to kill him in that fight. He had tried fists once; he would use guns next time.

"If yore boss has a lot of money on hand, it don't seem very smart tuh leave her alone," he said grimly.

As though his words had been a signal, a blatant roar of shots came crashing down the hill on the town. Fear sliced across Tom Harker's face, and his whirling stare froze on the stabbing winks of gun flame showing through the gloom high up the slope.

"That's comin' from the mine office!" he yelled hoarsely.

But Navajo Raine had already broken into a hard run toward the first steep pitch of the hill at the edge of town.

CHAPTER III

Gun Call for Fighting Men

ALL normal sounds of the town were turned inside out. The echoes of the shots rolled across the canyon and clashed back against each other. As he pounded up the hill, Navajo Raine could hear men yelling, shouts of alarm slicing out here and there along the hill.

The blaring of the guns had stopped as abruptly as they had come, and off to one side Raine could hear running men slashing their way through sage tangles. He couldn't tell whether they were running up the hill or down in the thick darkness.

He topped the shoulder of the hill, and the black hulk of a building loomed ahead of him. Somewhere near the building he heard a man curse harshly.

"Here comes one of 'em!"

Navajo Raine threw himself wildly to one side, heard the crash and saw the red flare of a shot, felt the slug jerk at the collar of his shirt. He heard Tom Harker, running close behind him, hit the ground in a frantic roll and hurl out a high-pitched shout.

"Dave! Stop shootin'!"

A girl cried out sharply. "It's Tom!"

The gun silenced, and Raine waited until Tom Harker moved up to his side. A man drifted toward them from the wall of the mine office, grumbling grimly, as he stared at the Ranger.

"There ain't a bigger fool than a man who'd rush up like you two without singin' out."

Tom Harker answered with a trace of ironic bleakness. "I've a hunch it was you in the most danger. Dave Leiber, get acquainted with Navajo Raine. Dave's bookkeeper, paymaster, and about everything else in the office," Harker said to the Ranger.

The lamp had been shattered by a bullet, but Tom Harker brought up a miner's lantern, lit it, and Raine got his first clear look at the bookkeeper. Dave Leiber was a tall, lean man with cool gray eyes and a hard shelf of a jaw. He seemed no stranger with the gun in his long-fingered hand. He stared coolly at the Ranger, and then grinned crookedly.

"Looks like I picked me a quick way to commit suicide," he said. "Glad I stopped shootin' before you cut loose, Raine."

The Arizona Ranger smiled, his narrow glance sliding around the room. The girl, Judith Nichols, was outside, reassuring the miners and townsmen who had run up. He could hear her voice, cool and clear.

"Yes, I know who they were. I saw them as they started shooting, but I'm not telling yet who they are. There's something strange about this. They didn't try to hurt Dave or me, just shot up the place and ran back to town. If I exposed them and had them arrested, they'd pay their fine and be free inside of an hour."

The mine office was in a wild disorder. A chair lay overturned, and a heavy desk had been skidded around for the protection of the mine owner and her bookkeeper. A lamp had been knocked to the floor, and Raine wondered that the spilled oil had not started a fire. Bullets had smashed in all the windows, scattering broken glass all over the room.

JUDY NICHOLS came through the door, a small, slender girl with troubled eyes and a gray-drawn face. Navajo Raine turned toward her, his mouth grim and hard.

"I couldn't help hearin' what yuh told those men outside, Miss Judy," he said quietly. "Tom here said you've got the miners' pay on hand. Do yuh mean tuh say those raiders made no attempt to get the money?"

She shook her head. "Not once," she answered. "And they didn't try to hit Dave or me. They simply stood around the building and shot up the office."

Tom Harker broke out, bitterly harsh. "But they might have killed you in the darkness. Who were they, Judy."

The girl's mouth tightened. "Having them arrested wouldn't do any good. What they did wouldn't keep them locked up for long. And it might make them worse if I turned them in."

There was a sharp edge in Navajo Raine's soft drawl. "It wouldn't make them worse, ma'am—it couldn't—but you won't have tuh turn them in. I reckon I know who was behind that raid. Jess Bourke?"

He startled her. "How—how did you know?"

He smiled thinly. "The fact they didn't try to rob or kill when they raided here told me," he said grimly. "What they wanted was to make Tom here change his company. They must have seen him pick me up. That's part of the reason they raided yuh. The rest of it is that they want me to come after them. This was just bait to get me."

Fear widened the girl's eyes. "But you're not going after them!"

Navajo Raine's chuckle was soft and without mirth. "I reckon I am, Miss." His tone was flat and inexorable. "They didn't raid here to kill you or yore bookkeeper, but if one of their slugs had dropped yuh, they wouldn't have cared. They're killers, and they want me out of the way. So I'm takin' their bait."

"You won't stand a chance with the crowd of gunslicks Bourke keeps around him," Harker spoke up tightly.

"That's my worry. Where do they hang out?"

"In the Broken Horn, generally. But yuh can't do it alone. I'm trailin' with yuh."

The Arizona Ranger's mouth was a thin slash above his blunt jaw. "Yore job is right here," he rapped out grimly. "You stay with this girl until she gets that payroll off her hands. What I've got to do is personal."

He turned without another word, and stalked out of the mine office. Full night had closed in on the canyon, and down the hill the town spread out its yellow splash of lights. A discordant jumble of noises floated up from the saloons and dance halls.

It was when he halted at the door of the Broken Horn that he heard the light step behind him. He spun, his hand snaking down to his holster, then relaxed as recognition hit him.

"Yuh were a fool to leave that girl alone up there," he grated.

Tom Harker answered frigidly. "Dave Leiber is with her, and he's as good with a gun as with a set of books. What's yore plan?"

Bleak humor glinted in Navajo Raine's eyes. "Just walk in and swallow their bait," he drawled. "If yuh're so set on riskin' yore hide, wait here till it busts open."

Harker nodded, reaching for his gun.

Raine turned, and strode coolly into the room where death waited.

THE Broken Horn wasn't a large saloon, but it had its own unmistakable character. The plank walls had been covered with a garish paper, and hung here and there were the usual honkeytonk pictures—"The Puncher's Dream," "Waiting For Her Man."

A bullet hole close to the batwing doors was labeled with some puncher's grim memorial to a fight:

Bill shore was fast
With his complaint;
His guns were slow,
So now Bill ain't!

Navajo Raine was coolly expression-

less as he drifted toward the pine-slabbed bar at the end of the room. Jess Bourke was slouching there with his back to the bar, a glitter of unholy satisfaction in his small black eyes.

There was a cautious stir of movement along the edges of the room. Navajo Raine walked slowly, giving those men who were not part of the trap time to sense trouble and clear out.

The Ranger's eyes were on Jess Bourke, but at the same time he could see every corner of the saloon through the mirror behind the bar. The room was cleared for action, and the jaws of the murder trap were ready to snap shut.

In one corner of the room was the thin man who had tripped the Ranger during his fight with Bourke. In the other corner was a short, thick hombre whose puffy lips were set in a lop-sided smile.

Another killer, slope-shouldered and pinch-faced, had edged around behind the Ranger to block off the door. The guns of all of them were half clear of leather, tense and ready.

Half the length of the room still separated the Ranger from Jess Bourke. Navajo Raine said softly, "Yuh wanted me here, didn't yuh, Bourke?"

Bourke's grin was thin with mockery. "For a smart man, yuh're shore a fool, Ranger," he sneered. "Yuh're in my back yard now, and there's no way out."

It took the last shred of doubt out of Navajo Raine's mind, and his smile was icy.

"I figured yuh'd recognized me," he said, and there was something deadly in his toneless drawl. "That's why you picked the fight at the post office. That's why yuh raided the Nichols mine office. Yuh knew I'd pick up yore trail sooner or later for the dirty work yuh've been doing around here, so yuh planned to put me out of the way right off."

Jess Bourke laughed with harsh contempt. "You figured all that out smart, Ranger, but you did a loose job figurin' what's ahead of yuh. Yuh're in a pocket, Raine, and it's sewed up tight."

He shoved away from the bar, suddenly tense, his murder plan showing red and ugly in his stare.

"Take a look behind yuh, lawman!"

But Navajo Raine didn't turn. He knew once he turned, or once he made a move against Bourke, the killers behind him would have their signal.

He was whip-sawed, but that gave him no sense of fear or defeat. He was a man with a job to do, and if it meant his death he was ready to sell his life for the highest possible price.

The fact that he betrayed no fear was a thing that struck alarm into the eyes of Jess Bourke. He moved in on the big man slowly, steadily until only two short paces separated them. But still he didn't stop.

Jess Bourke croaked, "All right, boys!"

IT WAS the murder signal. Navajo moved with unexpected speed. He lunged in on the big man, and he heard the guns of the killers behind him scrape clear of leather as his left fist rammed into Bourke's stomach. It was a blow that jolted the big man off balance.

Bourke's hands slashed for his guns, but Navajo Raine caught him by the arm, spun him around, trading places with the man. The guns of the killers across the room crashed into life. Bourke's body jerked under the impact of slugs, and a thin scream of agony sliced from his throat. He started to fall.

One of the killers yelled hoarsely. "That tricky devil! Look out, boss!"

But Jess Bourke was beyond conscious movement. He swayed, and his knees buckled, pitching him to the floor. Navajo Raine's guns whipped out, and he sent his first slug into the thin man in the left corner of the room. The man squalled and went down, and it seemed everything broke apart then.

The room was filled with blaring six-guns. A slug knocked splinters from the bar at Navajo Raine's side, and he drifted to one side, his guns spouting flame and smoke. The saloon doors banged open, and Tom Harker came plowing into the room. He hit the sagging body of the gunman who had

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crouched near the door, and the man didn't move after he struck the floor.

Harker whirled toward the far corner, but there was nothing for him there. The killer was propped up weakly against the wall, an expression of disbelief and horror contorting his pinched face, as his legs caved under him.

The mine superintendent spun toward the bar, saw the Arizona Ranger moving through the swirling fog of his gun smoke. Amazement knifed Harker's features.

"And I came here to help you!" he broke out. "Hell, it was all over before I could get through the door!"

Excitement was smashing up and down the street in waves, voices yelling, boots thudding. Men came boiling into the saloon, tight-faced and tense. One of them chattered nervously.

"I was here when the tall gent came in. Bourke and his crowd was expectin' him. They had their trap set. But now they're dead, and the tall gent is still on his feet. Danged if I ever heard the like of it! Fast! He must be lightning on greased skids!"

Then there was a commotion at the rear of the crowd, and a voice called out loudly, "It's Miss Nichols comin' in! Open up there and let her through!"

The girl came pushing through the crowd, her face white with fear. Relief struck her, as she saw Tom Harker.

"You're all right? Tom, I thought —I was afraid. . . ."

Her voice broke off, and she halted as though suddenly weary. Tom Harker moved to her side, his voice low and soft.

"I'm all right, Judy. I didn't even get in the fight. But you shouldn't be here. You shouldn't have left that money up there in the office."

Bitter defeat sank into the girl's face, and she turned her hands out in a small, hopeless gesture. Her voice came flat and toneless.

"We're whipped, Tom," she said. "We're finished." She seemed almost afraid to speak, the rest was so long in coming. "I was worried after you followed Mr. Raine down here. I started after you, and when I was halfway down I heard a shot in the mine office. I ran back, and Dave was on the floor, unconscious. Somebody had knocked him out, and stolen the payroll."

CHAPTER IV

Out of the Grave

BACK in the mine office, Navajo Raine's slow glance registered every detail. Dave Leiber was seated on the corner of the desk, and there was blood in the towel he held to his head. The man was still dazed and shaken by what he had gone through.

Raine moved to the desk. "Did he get yuh bad?" he asked quietly. He lifted the bookkeeper's hand and removed the towel, examined the sharp gash in the top of the man's head.

"I'll be all right," Leiber said dully. "What hurts me worse is that I couldn't save Miss Judy's money. I know how bad she needs it. She can't keep the mine now. She'll have to sell out."

"She's glad you weren't killed," Raine murmured.

He drifted slowly around the room. The heavy safe door was open, and there were papers scattered about. The cash drawer was hanging out, empty. He paused for a moment, looking at it broodingly.

He knew what that money had meant to Judy Nichols. It was the last payroll she had been able to rake up, but it had been a chance for her. She might have been able to stall off her men for another week with the hope of striking ore soon, but now that hope was gone. Her miners had wives and children to think of, and loyalty to her wouldn't buy them food and clothing.

Raine turned away from the empty safe, his eyes cold and hard. Whoever had done this job must have hidden around the mine office until the chance came for him to strike. It had been quick and complete, bitterly complete.

A pencil lay on the floor near a side wall. The Ranger bent, read the engraved letters "Dave Leiber," and let the picture fill out in his mind. Judy Nichols had found Leiber stretched out here on the floor, and the pencil must have slipped from his pocket when he fell.

Raine straightened, felt the crown of

his hat cave in as he bumped a ledger shelf overhead. He saw the black hairs as he started to turn away. There were three of them, short and jet, caught on a splinter.

The Ranger heard Judy Nichols say to Tom Harker, "I guess I'll have to sell to the Ajax company. They've been wanting to buy me out."

Navajo Raine swung around, his eyes cold and hard. "Yuh think there's any chance the Ajax outfit could be behind this?"

The girl shrugged, shook her head hopelessly. "I don't know what to think," she said dully.

Raine turned to Dave Leiber. "Tell me exactly what happened," he said quietly.

A worm of blood was crawling through the bookkeeper's raven hair, and he covered it with a fold of the towel. His voice came slow and bitter.

"There's nothing much to tell," he said. "I was working with the books when the man came in. He was masked and had a gun. He forced me to open the safe, but I took a chance when I swung the door to grab the gun I always kept inside. I got one shot at him, but it missed. Then he knocked me out with his gun barrel."

The Ranger's green-flecked eyes were narrow and thoughtful. "Anything yuh can remember that might give us a line on him?" he pressed.

The bookkeeper hesitated a moment, thinking. Then he said, "He might have been a gambler. His face was pale above his bandana, like he wasn't used to bein' out in the sun."

A spark caught in Navajo Raine's mind, but he let nothing reach into his face. "Think close, Leiber," he said grimly. "Was there anything else, any marks on him?"

THE bookkeeper pondered, pulling at his memory. "His hair was dark," he said slowly. His voice quickened with confidence that was like a stir of hope. "He was a tall, heavy man, with a sort of square head. There was an old scar across his temple."

Navajo Raine's face settled into bleak lines, a manhunter picking up a trail.

"Yuh shore of that?" he goaded thinly.

Dave Leiber nodded. "I'm certain. I remember noticing the scar across his left temple when I first saw him. There was something familiar about him, but I can't place him. The mask hid his face, but I've seen him before."

Tom Harker broke in with bitter hatred. "However, he ruined Miss Judy, unless we can catch him in time tuh get her money back. Think hard, Dave! Yuh know what this means tuh Judy."

A slow frown etched ridges in the brow of the bookkeeper, and there was a sharp glint of hope in his eyes.

"This may be something," he said eagerly. "He acted like he knew this place, like there was somethin' more than money behind the robbery he was pullin'. Like there was somethin' personal in the job. He must have hated Judy or her father for some reason. Just before I passed out, I heard him say something about making the Nichols pay for what they did to him."

Navajo Raine slid a glance to the girl, heard the uncertain run of her voice.

"There was one man who hated dad. He tried to rob dad one night three years ago, but dad caught him and had him arrested. He swore he'd make dad pay."

Dave Leiber cursed with sudden heat.

Navajo Raine Faces Heavy Odds as He Pursues the Phantom Horseman, Terror of the Range, in

LAW IN THE SADDLE

Next Issue's Arizona Ranger Story

By JACKSON COLE

PACKED WITH HIGH-SPEED ACTION THRILLS

"I know him now. The man who tried to rob old Matt was the same one who robbed me tonight. Pete Clason!"

Navajo Raine laughed with cold harshness. "That lie will land yuh behind bars, Leiber," he bit out. "I killed Pete Clason yesterday afternoon after he broke out of prison."

Alarm knifed the bookkeeper's features, and he slid off the desk corner as if he had been cut by a whip. Streaks of gray washed into his jaw. He planted both hands on the desk top, and stared at Raine with rising anger. His gun lay on the desk close to his right hand.

"Yuh're danged loose with your tongue, Raine," he said harshly. "Yore law badge gives you no call to ride honest men. The man who robbed me was masked, but don't think you can call me a liar because I made the wrong guess who he was."

Judy Nichols spoke up nervously. "Please, Mr. Raine! After all, Dave risked his life. . . "

The savage chop of the ranger's hand cut her off short His smile was thin, contemptuous, mocking. His voice was flat with danger.

"Yuh didn't make a wrong guess, Leiber. Every scrap of description you furnished was pointed toward Pete Clason with a purpose. You were framing him for the robbery, and it would have stuck if I hadn't been forced tuh kill him yesterday."

The bookkeeper cursed virulently. "You'll lose yore badge for this, blast you!"

"And you'll land in a jail cell," Raine stabbed back. "You helped Clason break out of Yuma by having a hoss cached for his getaway. Yuh wrote the letter that gave him the idea, only you disguised yore writing. But yuh didn't think to change the way you printed his prison number. A man in yore business works with figures, and he's generally proud of the way he makes them. It's a habit that yuh forgot to break, and the figures yuh printed on yore envelope are the same as those in your open ledger on the desk."

DAVE LEIBER sneered. "And yuh call that proof!"

"I've got all the proof I need to convict you!" the Ranger snapped. "Yuh remembered Pete Clason and his threat against Matt Nichols, and yuh manufactured a description tonight tuh fit him. Yuh wanted him hunted down for the job that you did. Yeah, the job that you pulled, Leiber! You opened the safe so it would look like it had been robbed, but we'll find the money where yuh hid it somewhere around here close. You weren't knocked out by a gun. The cut in yore scalp is too sharp for that. Yuh simply banged yore head on that ledger shelf over there to help finish out yore alibi. You left three black hairs from yore head in that shelf, if yuh want more. . . "

That was as far as he got. Dave Leiber moved, with no expression or word to betray him. He was suddenly more than a bookkeeper. He was a gunman, a killer trapped and ready to fight back.

He snatched up his gun from the desk, and it was a blue blur slashing up in the lantern light. It jumped, smashed, and Navajo Raine felt a hot fire streak across his shoulder as he faded swiftly to one side.

Then Raine's guns were whipping up, as the killer swiveled his weapon for another shot. The explosions came in a single roaring sound, and Raine knew he had fired only by the jerk of Leiber's body. The impact of the slug hammered the man back against the desk, pain and horror twisting through his face.

He turned slowly, his hands groping at the desk top. But he couldn't hold it. He didn't have the strength left to grip it. He slid down, and as his body slumped loosely to the floor Raine heard Judy Nichols' bitter sob.

Without lifting his eyes, the Ranger said, "Yuh'd better get her out of here, Tom."

Navajo Raine stood there alone in the mine office, staring at the man he had been forced to kill. Remorse was in the lawman's green-flecked eyes, but in him was the comforting knowledge that he had done his duty, that Leiber had forced on himself what he had got.

It was the same old familiar story of a man turned outlaw, waging a fight he couldn't win against honesty and decency. And Navajo Raine knew there would be other problems like this to be solved, other men like Dave Leiber to be met.

He turned grimly, and moved out of the room.

TEAMWORK FOR VICTORY

A Message for All Americans

By
JAMES M.
LANDIS

Director of the O. C. D.

JAMES M. LANDIS

UNITED NATIONS forces are on the offensive along the warlines of the world, but we must not let down at home. Our Axis enemies are brutally cunning and resourceful. If they think our guard is down, they may choose that moment to strike us. Whether the news of the fighting is good or bad, we must carry on at home until our total enemy is totally defeated.

It is going to be hard, but not as hard for us as for our sons and brothers in the war zones. Ours is the less spectacular task of tightening our belts, salvaging everything on scrapheaps that can be used in this war, putting in long hours of volunteer work, sharing our tires and gasoline, giving our blood, mending and scrimping and buying war bonds. There will not be many heroes among us. Our adventure will come through teamwork.

Teamwork to make every blackout a cavern of guesswork for the enemy at the bombsight. Teamwork to gather and transport every piece of rusted scrap and every bit of decaying rubber. Teamwork to fill the membership of the car club and force out the Hitler who rides the empty seat. Teamwork to care for children while their mothers work. Your team is your local Civilian Defense Council. The workers are all of us.

If we adventure well in these fields that are open to us, and work for a just peace for all men, there will be a new and freer world of peace in which we and our children can adventure after the war.

James M. Landis

Director,
U. S. Office of Civilian Defense.

MONTANA WINTER

By CLIFF WALTERS

Fight or Die—That's the Bitter Ultimatum Faced by Barney Logan and His Neighbors When They Find Themselves Roped into a Grim Cattle Deal with a Passel of Rustlers!

CHAPTER I

Furtive Campfires

IGNORING his brother, Dave Logan leaned against the jamb of the door and silently gazed down Cache Valley. Dave was tall, raw-boned and six years older than Barney. Now Dave stared with jaundiced eyes at the beauty of the valley where June grass was abundant, and where Cache Creek, fringed with willow growth, shimmered under the noonday sun. Almost it seemed as if Dave had not heard, so Barney repeated his invitation.

"It's ready now, Dave—what there is of it," he said. Then he sat down at the table and looked up as his brother lingered in the doorway.

Finally Dave Logan turned and came to the table. There was resentment smouldering in his blue eyes.

"Beans and biscuits," he said, harshly. "Biscuits and beans. I'm sick of the sight of them."

"Me, too," said Barney, grinning. "Let's ride over to Andy Todd's place tomorrow morning, borrow his rifle and see if we can't get us some deer meat."

"No grub, no rifle, no cattle left, no nothing," snarled Dave. "I'm fed up on biscuits and beans and Cache Valley, too. I'm sick of—"

His voice trailed off. Hoofs were sounding beyond the door. Then Chris Farnham, the husky, well-dressed storekeeper from Promontory, the nearest town, came in through the doorway.

"Howdy, Logan brothers," he said in bland tones. Yet he reeked with whisky fumes.

"Hello, Farnham," said Barney, his voice none too cordial. Dave Logan did not speak. He fastened a hostile gaze on the dark, rather handsome visitor.

"I'm out collecting today, gentlemen," Farnham announced. "You ranchers from Cache Valley don't come to town much any more. Not even to pay your bills."

"That's because there's no cash left in Cache Valley after the worst winter Montana has had in forty years," said Barney Logan. "Our herds are wiped out. You ought to know that by the number of carcasses you saw coming here."

"Bones don't pay bills," retorted Farnham, his manner changing to harshness. "When I bought that store from old Baldy Jones, you owed an eighty dollar bill. That was six months ago, and still the debt ain't paid. Since you have a couple of saddle horses out there in your corral, suppose you give me a bill of sale for them both. That's forty apiece and I'll call it square."

"You're not taking our black horse for no forty dollars," growled Dave Logan. "He's worth a hundred of any man's money. And the sorrel's nearly as good."

THE face of the storekeeper flushed an angry scarlet.

"If that's the way you feel," he shouted, "pay me cash now."

"Haven't we just told you we're broke?" Barney put in. "Don't be in such a rush. The minute we get money we'll square things up."

"Too bad you paupers in this valley haven't as much livestock as nerve." Farnham's voice was thick and it became

Dave Logan swung the chunk of cedar which thudded against Farnham's head

more evident he had been drinking heavily. "Not even capital enough to buy grub, yet you sit there trying to stall me about your just debts."

Dave Logan arose quickly to his feet.

"Get out, Farnham," he cried. "Don't come back till you're invited."

"Hold on, Dave," said Barney quietly. "After all, we do owe the money."

"That's right," said the storekeeper. Since riding from town he had almost finished a pint of whisky. "Soothe your dear brother, Barney. He's been ready to cut my throat ever since I moved into Promontory. He didn't want me shining up to Myra Clark, the prettiest girl in town. But I did. And now she's going to marry me on the fifteenth of this month. That's what's sticking in your brother's craw." He gave an evil leer.

"Shut up, Farnham," advised Barney. Seeing the wrathful tightness of Dave's jaw he felt sorry Farnham had said that. Dave Logan had cared a lot for Myra Clark. Even as Barney leaped from his chair Dave Logan already was moving toward the storekeeper.

Farnham struck the first blow, but Dave Logan countered with a stiff left jab. It caught the storekeeper flush on the mouth, knocked him back through the open door, but he did not go down. He straightened up and lunged at Dave Logan who had come outdoors after him. Dave ducked his wild right-hand swing, letting it go over his head. Farnham's hamlike fist landed on the rough logs of the cabin wall, skinning his knuckles.

For a moment Farnham danced with pain, nursing his injured fist while Dave Logan stood back and laughed at him in an aggravating manner. Then Farnham lost his temper completely. His eye happened to fall upon the axe stuck in the chopping block of the woodpile nearby. With a bellow of fury he sprang for the axe, jerked it loose and went after Dave Logan, swinging the weapon like a wildman.

Dave Logan managed to avoid his first rush. Barney Logan yelled a warning and sprang back into the cabin after the butcher-knife. Dave Logan dodged the second swing of the axe and then, forgetting the six-gun in his belt, snatched up a chunk of cedar wood against which he stumbled in trying to keep away from Farnham.

With it he succeeded in deflecting the axe which only tore his shirt sleeve and skinned his arm a little. Then the chunk of cedar wood thudded against Farnham's head. He went down hard, lay still, just as Barney Logan came running out of the cabin again, with the knife.

"Gosh, you hit him hard, Dave," gasped Barney. "Maybe you've killed him."

"Hey, what's going on there?" yelled a voice.

Barney turned, saw Andy Todd riding up on his old roan horse. "I saw you hit him," said the little rancher, leaping from the saddle. "It looks like Farnham might be dead."

"Well, what was I supposed to do?" asked Dave Logan. "Stand there and let him butcher me with an axe?"

"Easy," cautioned the neighbor who owned the next ranch downstream. "I saw that fight, or most of it, Dave. So did Barney. If Farnham, or anybody else, came at me with an axe, I'd do just what you did. What started it in the first place?" Todd was now bending over Farnham.

BARNEY LOGAN explained what had taken place. "It wasn't just a wrangle over a store bill," he explained. "Farnham talked about Myra Clark, and said things he didn't have any right to say. I don't blame Dave."

"Maybe a jury would, if Farnham don't come to," said Dave Logan. "Well, I've been wanting to ride out of this valley. Now I'm riding. After losing Dad last fall, losing the cattle this Winter, I'm doggoned if I'm going to lose my freedom."

"Don't pull out," Barney Logan said. "I saw what happened and so did Andy here."

"What happened and what some slick-tongued lawyer can make a jury of Farnham's friends over in Promontory believe, are two different things," said Dave Logan. "Only a couple of years ago I was camping with that Castle Rocks bunch, a bunch juries don't like. Maybe that bunch is still there. Besides they'd say I tried to kill Farnham because I was jealous, and anyway I'm sick and tired to death of this valley."

Although both Barney Logan and Dave Todd pleaded with Dave to stay, far down in his heart Barney realized it was no use. Often of late his

brother had talked of leaving, so he was not surprised when Dave obdurately insisted on collecting his stuff, saddling his black horse, tying on his warbag and riding away. At the mouth of Cache Valley he turned to wave and then was gone!

Gloomily Barney reentered the cabin. Then he boosted Chris Farnham into Dave's bunk and sat down to wait for Andy Todd, who had gone home for his buckboard, so they could take the injured man to town. Barney looked at the haunch of venison Andy Todd had brought over. An hour ago Barney would have relished that meat. Now his appetite was gone. He missed Dave, too.

Barney Logan sat there wishing Farnham would revive. Gazing down the valley which was his home, this valley which held four ranches, he found he could no longer see any beauty in this grass covered range which had once charmed his eye. No cattle grazed there now. His thoughts reverted to the late Winter, to the frightful cold spells, to the ice-laden blizzards that had persistently howled down from the north, months upon months without end. Gaunt snow-covered herds of cattle had lain down to die in droves, too weak to break through the thick crusts which had covered the frozen grass beneath. Dave and he had worked, and slaved and starved to save them all in vain. Piles of bleached bones attested to the futility of their effort.

When Spring broke, Barney and Dave rode to neighboring ranges and tried to lease some cattle or to buy them by mortgaging the ranch, which was clear. Andy Todd did the same thing. So did Herb Tyler and old "Jing" Jenkins, the two other neighbors. But, after such a Winter, no cattle were for sale. There had been talk of forming a crew to go South and drive a herd back, but nothing had come of it so far.

Barney and Andy Todd took the injured man nine miles to town, nine miles to the east, with his saddle horse trailing behind. They pulled up at Doc Venable's house about three o'clock in the afternoon. A crowd gathered to find out what had happened. Men immediately took sides in the affair. Barrel-chested squat Adrian Teal, Farnham's friend, who had looked after the store during the owner's absence, grew bitter and loquacious almost at once.

Teal took several drinks from a black bottle which he carried and then began to make charges in a whisky-furred voice.

"Todd and Logan ain't tellin' a straight story," he shouted. "I know what happened. Chris Farnham asked for the money that was owing him, and Dave Logan seen a good excuse to take his spite out on Chris. He's been sore as a boil ever since Farnham took his girl."

Barney Logan, six feet tall, biggest and best looking of the two brothers, looked beyond the group and saw a dark-haired, dark-eyed girl standing there, Myra Clark.

"Dave wouldn't have lost her if the Logan cattle hadn't been lost," he said in loud tones. "Those blizzard winds cooled her love."

As he spoke he purposely met the girl's eye.

Myra Clark's father owned the livery stable here in town. When she heard Barney Logan's remark her pretty face became pale but her mouth straightened into a firm line.

"Maybe there were other reasons," she said to Barney Logan. "Maybe I smelled the smoke of an outlaw campfire burning over in the Castlerocks. Where is Dave now?"

INWARDLY, Barney winced at that thrust. He had never considered that angle. Somebody must have talked to this girl whose father had brought her along when he had moved to Promontory about a year ago.

"He's gone back to the coyote pack that holes up in the Castle Rocks," rumbled Adrian Teal in slurred tones. "And this youngest of the Logan litter stands here shooting off his handsome face about how much him and his brother wants to pay back the money they owe to poor Chris Farnham."

"Shut up, Teal," said Andy Todd, sensing trouble.

"Let one of the yellow Logans shut me up," raged the stocky man, with clenched fists and burning eyes. "They was two agin one out there in Cache Valley today. Maybe three, with you, Todd, helping. You owe Farnham a bill, too. Here there'll be fair play and justice. If Chris Farnham dies—and the doc says he might—Barney Logan'll be

strung up. His yellow brother, too, if we can ketch him!"

"Listen to who is preaching justice," Barney Logan retorted. "A couple weeks ago a Mexican sheepherder stopped at our cabin for dinner. With a check for three months' wages in his pocket, he was heading for Promontory. He cashed that check at Chris Farnham's store, but he never rode back through Cache Valley, bringing the supplies and smoking tobacco he intended to fetch Dave and me. He never showed up at all. He was wearing the same kind of fancy, silver-studded belt you're wearing now, Teal."

MEN stared at Teal. For a moment his thick lips twitched, as if with panic. Then he cleared his throat.

"I bought this belt from a feller who won the Mexican's belt in a Monte game," he said, with a sidewise leer at the crowd.

"You're lying, Teal, but not fast enough to make it smooth," jeered Barney Logan.

Teal did not like that nor the curious stares of the other men. He flew at Barney Logan as furiously as Chris Farnham had done at Dave Logan. As cool as his brother earlier in the day, and equally as cool as his brother under similar circumstances, Barney countered the attack with quick, savage blows. His knuckles burned as he crushed Teal's bulbous nose with a looping swing.

Staggered by that blow, Teal came in under Barney's flailing arms to land a terrific blow to the younger man's ribs. But Barney Logan weathered it and sent a savage left hook into Teal's body, and brought up his right fist in a jarring cross to the right side of Teal's jaw. While Teal was still staggering he sent over a straight left to Teal's thick snarling lips and drove a hard right to his solar plexus. The bearded town bully, tough as he was, went down on his back.

Sitting up, Teal reached for his gun. But Barney Logan had been expecting just that move, although he, himself, was unarmed. As Teal's hand moved, Logan sprang over to Andy Todd's side like a flash, yanked out the rancher's weapon, turned and fired, apparently without aim. But the bullet tore the rising six-gun from Teal's grasp and took the fight out of him.

Barney Logan moved forward and took Teal's gun.

"Get out of town, Teal," he warned. "If I ever shoot at you again, it won't be at your hand."

"I'll get out," whined Teal, holding his bleeding hand. "But I'll go to Oxyoke after the sheriff. Then I'll be back."

"Will you?" Barney reached down, unbuckled and took the fancy belt off the man on the ground. "All right, go ahead. I dare you."

"Come over to the doctor's house and let him fix that hand," suggested Myra Clark, moving over to Teal. As he arose from the ground she took hold of his arm.

Barney Logan looked hard at her.

"Any friend of Farnham's is bound to be a pal of yours, eh, Miss Clark?" he said.

The girl's dark eyes flashed. Then she walked haughtily away piloting Adrian Teal into the same house where Barney Logan and Andy Todd had carried Chris Farnham.

CHAPTER II

Teal Seeks Revenge

SOON after the fight the crowd began to disperse, a crowd that seemed to think Adrian Teal had got what he deserved. A small, homely little man with shabby clothing moved toward Barney Logan and Todd who were still standing by the buckboard. Logan recognized Herb Tyler, another neighbor from Cache Valley. And he was a little drunk, the first time Logan had ever seen him that way.

"What are you doing in town, Herb?" asked Andy Todd.

"Fetched my wife Martha in to ketch the morning stage for Oxyoke—her and the two kids," said the little man, his face darkening with gloom. "No cattle, no money, and no chance to make any. Well, you can't blame my wife for wanting to take the kids and go back to her folks in Nebraska. They have a better home than I can give her here, and she

can come back when I get things lined up again. Martha even wanted me to sell what's left of our layout and go with her, but I said no. I homesteaded my place and don't want to give it up now."

Todd looked at Barney Logan. Both men felt sorry for Herb Tyler, an honest, hard-working little man who obviously dreaded the idea of going back to the lonely log house in the lower end of Cache Valley.

"Just a temporary separation," said Logan vaguely. "Don't worry, Herb."

"Oh, she'll come back, all right," Tyler repeated, as if trying to reassure himself. "Hey, Barney. Dave left town a little while afore you got here. He wanted me to give you this." He handed Logan an envelope.

Barney Logan opened it. It was a legal document assigning him Dave's half-interest in the ranch. Dave must have had this paper drawn soon after leaving the ranch, but Barney experienced no elation. His only reaction was a melancholy realization his brother had no intention ever of returning to this range. At the bottom of the paper Dave had written three words.

"Good luck, kid," they said.

After a while Doc Venable came out of the house and reported Chris Farnham would recover, although it had been a close call. The old doctor also stated Adrian Teal, who had left his place via the back door, was enroute to Oxyoke, the county seat, to get the sheriff. Rather bluntly he suggested both of the men remain in town.

Barney Logan laughed.

"Teal ain't going after the sheriff," he said. "And if anybody wants me, or Andy, they know where to find us."

With the last two dollars he had, Logan bought some forty-five shells and two sacks of tobacco. Then he and Todd persuaded Herb Tyler to get his team from the Clark's Livery Stable and drive home with them. At the barn they found Myra Clark talking with her father. The girl moved to meet Barney Logan as he followed Tyler and Todd down the line of stalls.

"Last fall, when Dave and I were going together, he bought me a bracelet over at Oxyoke," she said to Barney. "I took it back to the store where he got it. Here's the money." She proffered him a twenty-dollar bill.

Logan stared at that bill, making no move to accept it. The girl stamped her foot.

"Take it!" she cried. "You need it worse than I do." She tossed the bill down on the black, worn floor-planks of the stable and walked out. Logan watched her disappear into the modest vine-covered cottage where she and her father lived. Logan's heart seemed about to burst with rage and humiliation.

"Well, pick it up, Barney," said Herb Tyler. "It may be a long time till you see another one." Logan swung about, lightning in his glance.

"Shut up!" he flared. Then, in quick contrition: "I'm sorry, Herb."

Slowly he recovered the bill, folded it up and put it in his pocket with trembling fingers.

After Tyler had hitched up his team, Andy Todd got his own rig and Barney Logan climbed in beside him again. It was not until the two buckboards were two miles beyond the outskirts of town that Todd spoke to Barney.

"Myra Clark hurt you worse'n Teal's fists, didn't she?" said the little rancher.

"Maybe what she did was worth twenty dollars to her," answered Logan, through tight lips.

THE two buckboards rolled on across the sagebrush hills, wound through Ribbon-Draw and descended into Cache Valley. At a clump of willow trees near Cache Creek, Todd's team snorted fear, and Logan saw a rider mounted on a gray horse, come spurring into view, a short, squat rider with a bandaged right hand. After him raced a tall rider mounted on a fleet, leggy buckskin horse. He was swinging a rope, and crowding the little gray. The loop darted out, snared the gray's rider who soared from the air and landed hard on the grassy turf.

Barney Logan hopped out of the rig quick and ran toward the two men. They were not far off. First he looked at the man on the ground, Adrian Teal, then at the buckskin's rider, who kept backing the buckskin to keep the rope taut. The rider was gaunt, stern-faced old Jing Jenkins, fourth rancher in the valley.

"I ain't just practisin,' because I haven't enough cattle left to practise ropin' on, Barney," he said. "Teal knows

it, too, by Jeffrey! While I was ridin' past your place I happened to see this bull-necked feller pin' brush agin your cabin to burn it down. When he seen me comin' he made a run for his hoss, but my Old Buck is pretty fast and I had to use my rope to keep Teal from becomin' too all-fired bashful."

At a gesture from Logan, Jenkins relaxed the tension and Teal sat up to rub his head. He was too jarred to pay much attention while Logan explained recent events to Jenkins. But he did revive in a hurry when he overheard a remark dropped by the four ranchers who were now standing in a group nearby.

"I guess that there cottonwood over there will do all right," said Jenkins. "I'll toss my lariat over that large limb."

Teal's eyes rolled wildly. He seemed already to feel the hemp around his thick neck.

"Let's play a dirty trick on the world, and turn him loose, Jing," said Logan. "Let's give the coyote a chance to run for his life. If he didn't have a game hand, I'd beat him up again."

"Mu-much obliged," Teal croaked. "I'll sure remember, Logan. I won't never bother you after this. I swear to that."

"Better not," said Barney Logan in flat and hard tones.

"Mind what Logan says," put in Herb Tyler. "Remember, Teal. If you're seen in Cache Valley again, you're due for a necktie party."

"Start hoofin' it after your horse," said Jenkins. "If you don't ketch up with him, that'll be the first good thing that's happened to the Cache Valley ranchers in a long time."

It was not too easy for Teal to travel when he did get under way. But he traveled as fast as he could, hoping fervently to overtake the gray pony that was heading for town.

"Find any cattle on your trip, Jing?" asked Todd.

"Nope," rumbled the grizzled rancher. "They ain't enough dogies left in this country to graze the grass off a pint-sized hill. I did hear of a small trail herd comin' through the Bell Buttes country, but it's a cinch they're headin' somewhere else." Old Jing, who had coiled and hung his rope on the saddle, gave the rope strap a disgusted yank. "Cache Valley, bah! Cashless Valley. No wonder your wife left, Tyler. I don't blame Dave a bit, Barney."

"What are we going to do, fellers?" asked Andy Todd. "Stay here, starve out, and then sell our places for what somebody wants to give? Perhaps some big outfit would buy this valley in one hunk. It's the best range out of doors, in spite of what happened last winter."

"Mebbe they would," old Jing answered. "And it could be bought for about a third of what it's worth. Me, I'm stayin' here. And when I'm dead, I'll shore be layin' under the sod alongside the man I rode into this valley with, Barney's father. I may die of starvation, but that's the way it stands."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Jing," Barney Logan said. "It goes for me, too. How would you like to come up and spend the night at the Logan cabin? I have nothing to offer you but biscuits and beans—oh, yes, there is—that hunk of venison Andy fetched me."

"Suits me," said old Jing. He had wanted to spend the night in his own cabin, but he knew that Charley Logan's younger son would be mighty lonesome tonight. And old Jing, whose nickname had derived from those musical jingle-bob spurs he wore, was as loyal as if Barney Logan were his own son. Barney was more like old Charley than was Dave.

GRATEFUL for companionship Barney Logan went to sleep that night thinking about Dave, about Chris Farnham and Teal . . . and about a dark-eyed girl who had contemptuously tossed him a twenty-dollar bill. Plagued by this last disturbing memory, the young man did not go to sleep until old Jing called out in the darkness:

"Stop squirmin' around like a short-haired dog layin' on an ant hill, will you?" said the grizzled old rancher.

The next few days seemed long to Barney. He tried to keep his mind off his worries by working hard. On the third day he was snaking firewood up from the creek when a stranger rode up to the cabin. He was a big, blond-headed man with bright blue eyes. Barney Logan noticed his smile and liked him at once.

"Howdy," said the blond man. "I hear you're needin' cattle. You shore have range for 'em here."

"Needing and getting is two different things," Barney Logan answered. "What's on your mind?"

"Sellin' cattle," came the reply. "Me and my punchers has jest drove up a bunch from the Territory and I'd as soon sell 'em here if I can get good prices."

Cattle! Barney Logan's heart leaped.

"That bunch over on the Bell Buttes trail?" he asked.

"That's us. Say, they tell me old Jing Jenkins lives around here. I'd shore like to see him. My handle's Bob Pennington."

"And you will," said Barney. "Come on."

Within the hour all four ranchers of Cache Valley were grouped about Bob Pennington, the big, affable man for whose father Jing Jenkins had worked as a young man. There was talk of cattle prices, high prices, and then the four ranchers rode out with Pennington and looked over the herd of six hundred cattle. They were not the best cattle, being thin and none too well bred. Thirty dollars per head seemed too much for them.

"If we each took one hundred and fifty head, that'd be forty-five hundred dollars," calculated Jenkins. "Gosh, as good as our spreads are, I don't think we could raise that much on 'em, fellers. But Bob here won't split his herd, and I don't blame him for that."

"Let's head for Promontory and talk to old McWane," suggested Herb Tyler, desperately anxious to build his outfit back to where it could support his absent wife and children.

"That old skinflint banker wouldn't lend us that much money even if we had better security," said Andy Todd.

"We kin ask him," growled old Jing.

"Sure we can," put in Barney Logan eagerly. "Will you and your riders hold your herd here till we get back from town, Mr. Pennington?"

"Yep, but don't be gone no longer'n you must."

Barney and his three companions, cutting across the rough country south of Cache Valley, headed for town. It was mid-afternoon before, with whizzing rowels, they strode into the little log bank in Promontory and sought out thin, bald, dull-eyed Mac McWane. The banker looked up from his desk, wary and alert.

"Well, quite a delegation," he said. "What's on the minds of the Cache Valley ranchers?"

Jing did the talking. Cattle could be bought. If the price was high, McWane would not be taking too much risk. . . . He was full of arguments.

Barney Logan, standing by the window, forgot to listen to the talk. He was watching Myra Clark and Chris Farnham as they sauntered down the street, arm in arm. Farnham still wore a bandage about his head but seemed all right otherwise. He was laughing as he talked to the girl at his side.

"We'll fix up some papers, then I'll ride out with you and have a look at those cattle," Logan heard McWane say at last.

"Good!" cried Barney Logan, swinging around.

"It's about time you come out of your trance," growled old Jing. "I talk my heart out to swing this deal, and you stand there gawkin' out the window like there was somethin' to see."

THE peppery banker looked up quickly.

"Don't poke fun at the town," snapped McWane. "It's an all-right place."

"We'll shore call it City Beautiful—if you loosen up with the dinero," said old Jing, winking at Logan.

Soon five riders headed back across the hills, old McWane astride of a scrawny old pony, seemingly as dry and aged as himself. When they reached the grazing herd of cattle, they stopped and Logan's spirits drooped when he saw McWane's grimace of disapproval at the condition of the beeves. Jenkins argued some more and Logan's optimism perked up again when the banker at last spoke in crisp tones.

"A bank can't thrive if it doesn't recover from losses already sustained," said McWane. "And there were plenty of losses last winter. We'll fix up some notes. Then I'll deposit forty-five hundred dollars to the credit of each of you. Mr. Pennington can get his money at the bank, by cashing your checks. . . . You say you know Pennington, Mr. Jenkins?"

"Knowed him when he was a kid. Used to work for his paw, down in Texas. One of the best cowman in the state."

It was too late in the day to move the herd on to Cache Valley. Pennington had his cook unload some grub from the wagon for the hungry purchasers of cattle who would stay with their new herd all night. Then the trail outfit departed.

CHAPTER III

Showdown in Pine Creek

AT DUSK a campfire glowed on the brink of Sandrock Springs. The aroma of boiling coffee mingled with the scent of Montana cedar and sage. Spuds and bacon sizzled in two big frying pans Pennington had donated along with the grub. And Herb Tyler, to top things off, pulled out two pint bottles.

"Amber dew of delight," whooped old Jing, grabbing one of the proffered bottles. "So that's the kind of tobacco you buy when you go to town, eh, Herb?"

Supper that night was a joyous occasion. The spirits of four Cache Valley ranchers—men who had worked and lost—were on the rise again. If each had obligated himself for forty-five hundred dollars, if hard toil lay ahead, hope had been restored by grazing longhorns now bedded down under the bright stars. Barney Logan laughed with the rest, and knew that Dave, if he were here, would approve of mortgaging the Logan ranch.

Not that Dave Logan ever had seemed much concerned about the future of the ranch. He had never settled down again after losing the girl he loved, that pretty girl who, this afternoon, had walked arm in arm with his enemy, Chris Farnham, along the main street of Promontory.

The following day the herd was driven into Cache Valley. The day after that, parts of the herd were sorted until each man, picking the best cattle first, received his quota. After this would come the owner's task of re-branding.

Since this action took place at Jing Jenkins' place, Barney Logan stayed at Jing's cabin for two nights, rather than ride a tired sorrel horse up and down the valley.

Early on the third morning, Logan went home for branding irons while his three neighbors gathered sagebrush for the fires.

On the table in the cabin, which he had not occupied for three nights, he found a note which stunned him. It was pencilled and signed by Dave and said:

> Do not buy any cattle from Pennington at any price.

Barney read that message over many times before he put it in his pocket. Why should Dave write such a warning? What had he learned? Where was he now? Had he learned of better cattle on the way? Delivered this note himself?

Barney Logan felt puzzled but nonetheless he rode at top speed down the valley and showed the note to his neighbors. Before the last man had read it, four riders—the banker McWane, Sheriff Ed Oakland from Oxyoke, and two middle-aged strangers—came down the valley road and headed for the group who had gathered near the Jenkins corrals.

"Now what?" old Jing growled to his companions. "It's plumb early in the mornin' for visitors."

The Cache Valley men soon learned the purpose of the four riders. Pennington's cattle had been stolen. The two strangers, Frank Gardell and Sam Ainsworth, owners of a ranch in Kansas Territory, had hired Bob Pennington to trail the cattle north for them, on contract. Later, according to their story, they had found out that Pennington, having drunk and gambled away the outfit inherited from his father, had gone crooked. The wagon belonged to Gardell.

"Why are you here?" Jing asked Sheriff Oakland. "Why ain't you out trailin' Pennington, if he got away?"

"He got away, all right. And with eighteen thousand dollars," said McWane angrily. "Cuss it all, Jenkins, you said you knew Pennington." The banker dismounted and was standing next to Logan.

"I did, up to the time he was a six-year-old," replied the range veteran.

"Too bad you—and me—didn't know him better, eh?" put in the shaggy-haired man whose name was Frank Gardell.

"Too bad—for who?" Barney Logan asked.

"For the Cache Valley ranchers," replied McWane. "You bought those cattle, and you paid for them!"

BARNEY LOGAN swallowed hard and leaned back against the corral fence. Jing Jenkins began to swear. Andy Todd gripped a branding iron with rough, calloused hand. And Herb Tyler, too stunned to do anything, just stood there.

Logan looked at Oakland.

"Have you tried to catch Pennington and the four others with him?"

"Shore," said the officer, angrily. "But men with eighteen thousand dollars stolen money in their pockets don't advertise which way they're headin'. They split up and hide somewhere. I've got two deputies out now, but I doubt that they'll find any of 'em, much less Pennington. He got too much headstart. Gardell and Ainsworth didn't show up in Promontory till yesterday afternoon."

"If you was trailin' stolen cattle, why didn't you show up here yesterday?" Barney Logan asked Gardell.

"We did come part way into the Valley," said Gardell. "We came far enough to see the cattle, so we hit for town to get the sheriff. Don't think me and Ainsworth are pullin' a trick. That's already been done. But we own them cattle. We proved it to Sheriff Oakland before we ever left Promontory."

"He's right," Oakland said. "I'll vouch for that. Well, it's a good thing you didn't have time to do no brandin'. I shore hope Pennington's picked up somewhere before he spends all of yore money."

"Our money bosh!" shouted Barney Logan in exasperation. "We borrowed it and threw it away without ever seeing a nickel of it. If only I had seen this note from my brother in time. . . ." He showed it to McWane.

"Humph," grunted the banker after reading it. "Dave warns you about buying cattle from Pennington. Maybe just your neighbors were supposed to get hooked. Maybe Dave and Pennington are friends."

Logan's hands shot out, gripped the banker's throat.

"You nickel-pinchin' rat," he snarled. "If you say Dave would cheat his neighbors and friends you lie."

"Let loose of him," roared Sheriff Oakland, pulling Logan away from McWane who gagged and rubbed his throat when released. "It's a cinch yore brother, if he wrote that message, must have knowed something about Pennington. Mebbe Pennington's one of the Castle Rocks bunch. And I'll bet that's where Dave headed for when he thought Chris Farnham was goin' to cash in. Looks like Mac here ain't far wrong."

"He's a blasted liar if he says Dave Logan'd cheat me, Tyler or old Jing there," spoke up Andy Todd, eyes wrathful. "And so is anybody else, whether he's wearing a tin star or not."

"That goes for me, too," said old Jing and Herb Tyler in chorus. Both men glared at the sheriff.

Uncomfortable under these hostile stares, Oakland changed the subject.

"Well, you've got yore cattle," he said to Gardell and Ainsworth.

"And I'm left holding eighteen thousand dollars worth of notes for land that ain't worth fifteen thousand," said McWane. "What do you ranchers want to do? Those notes aren't due until December first. But I guess there's no point in delaying things that long, is there?"

"Are you asking us to turn this valley over to you right now?" asked Barney Logan. "If you are, you can jump in the first deep lake you see. Maybe I'll lose my place, but not till the last minute of the last hour of the last day."

"So this is all the thanks I get for trying to accommodate you, eh?" McWane screeched. "Next time you catch me sweating and slaving and scratching to dig up the money so an ungrateful bunch of beggarly ranchers can—"

"You may have done some scratchin' all right, but I didn't see you sweatin' and slavin' for the money," jeered Jenkins. "You probably had it right in yore greasy old wallet all the time." The hard-bitten old cowman motioned to Barney, Todd and Tyler. The four of them turned and walked slowly up to the Jenkins cabin.

No word was spoken until they entered the cabin.

"Thanks for standin' up for Dave, everybody. Well, what do we do now? Start trying to pick up Pennington's trail?"

THE ranchers considered the question soberly.

"It's the only chance left," said Herb Tyler. "Sheriff Oakland is nothing but wind-bag. He don't mean to do nothing more. Let's follow Pennington clear to Mexico if that's where he's gone. No, gents, I can't write and tell my wife Martha I've throwed the ranch away. Pennington must have left some kind of a trail. He can't have flown like a bird."

"Herb, you and Andy kin head for Promontory to look for sign," said Jing Jenkins. "As for me, I'm takin' Barney and headin' for Castle Rocks to have a powwow with Dave if he's there. If some gent tipped him off about Pennington, mebbe the same feller might know where Pennington has holed up. That's jest a hunch, but so long as there's four of us, we ought to ride in pairs."

"You're right," said Barney Logan.

Thus it was agreed. Talk was still going on when Barney, happening to glance out the window, saw a distant rider on a gray horse angling down the side of a slope at the head of the valley. Barney thought of the gray horse Adrian Teal had ridden the day he tried to burn the cabin. Maybe Teal was coming back to try again. Logan thought for a moment. All he had to do was to speak to the other ranchers and Teal's life was forfeit but that meant more trouble with the sheriff. Logan thought he knew a better way.

"I'm going home, boys," he said. "I'll be right back."

"Hurry it up, Barney," called out Jing Jenkins.

Barney Logan followed the creek trail up the valley. He rode fast at first, then more cautiously, with his gun loosened in the holster. Turning into the shallows of Elm Creek, he rode upstream for a distance and then slowed down. Soon from the other bank, amid a tangled thicket, a horse nickered. As Logan twisted in the saddle he caught glint of an uplifting gun and then the scowling features of the squat, thick-chested Adrian Teal.

What happened then followed in split-second sequence.

"I'm back, Logan," yelled Teal as he pulled the trigger. The heavy gun roared and kicked up, with a burst of white powder-smoke.

Barney Logan had no time to draw. Even as the squat man fired he was throwing himself sideways out of the saddle.

He landed, sprawling awkwardly, in the waters of the creek with a mighty splash as the frightened sorrel snorted and dashed away up the creek.

Flat on the gravel, drenched and half blinded by water, Barney Logan frantically clawed at an empty holster for his missing six-gun which had been jarred out by the fall. Up on the bank, amid the bushes Teal, uncertain as to whether he had killed Logan, frantically ducked under the smoke and peered out from his cover, eager for a second shot.

At this instant Barney Logan caught sight of his six-gun lying a few feet away, submerged in the clear waters of the stream. As his hand closed over the butt, Teal's face appeared again in another place.

Teal let out a piercing yell as he lifted his Colt for a finishing shot at the man in the creek below him.

But that shot was never fired. Even as Teal lifted the gun Barney Logan's thumb snapped the hammer of the dripping weapon he held in his hand and a thunderous report bellowed along Pine Creek.

Teal's face jerked back and disappeared from view.

Slowly the drenched Barney Logan rose to his feet. Then he waited for a moment. Not a suspicious sound or movement came from the thicket opposite him.

Some of the bluejays began to chatter excitedly in the top of a towering elm a short distance away. Moving deliberately but making hard work of it in his high-heeled riding boots, Andy climbed the bank and looked down at the man he had shot, lying there in the willows beside a flat rock.

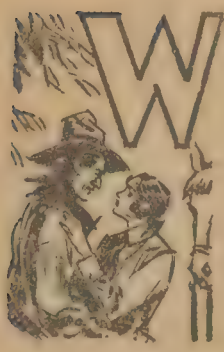
"Where did you get that horse, Teal?" he asked.

Adrian Teal did not answer. He was lying flat on his back with his bearded face upturned toward the sky. Even as Logan looked he saw Teal's eyes glaze and his jaw fall open. Not much blood showed on the front of his shirt.

Adrian Teal would answer no more questions in this life. Logan's bullet had gone through his heart. He was dead.

CHAPTER IV

Outlaws of Castle Rocks



WHILE Barney Logan was still standing on the top of the bank, looking down at the dead man at his feet, his quick ear heard the sound of a horseshoe clicking against a rock, not far away. Like a flash he whirled, lifting his weapon as he did so. Then he lowered the gun. A gray horse, bearing a slim rider, came up over the brow of the slope from the stream and halted a short distance off. The rider was Myra Clark. Her glance fell upon Teal and she turned pale. Then she looked at Barney Logan.

"He is dead?" she said, and nodded toward the man on the ground.

"Plenty dead," answered Logan harshly. "Better tell your friend Chris Farnham when you see him. What brought you out here? Were you anxious to find out if he got me?"

A trace of anger showed in her cheek.

"It's free for anyone to ride, isn't it?" she countered, and met his gaze in that steady, disconcerting way of hers. Her calmness bothered Logan. He could not understand why she accepted Teal's death so calmly.

"I'm surprised to see you riding Teal's gray horse," said Logan.

"He's Dad's horse now. My father bought him from Teal the other day. Dad owns that bay horse, too. He got him on a trade he made with a man named Pennington. Pennington wanted our big brown horse, Beaver."

"The fast horse, eh?" said Logan. "Well, I can understand that." His tone grew bitter. "Then Teal borrowed the bay horse to ride out here and kill me, eh?" Girls were strange creatures, he reflected. This one should have become hysterical at the sight of the dead man. Instead she discussed horses.

"He hired the bay. I—I guess I'd better lead the bay horse back to town and send someone out for Teal. Maybe you'd better come to town, too, Mr. Logan."

He grinned at her. It was a smile without mirth.

"No, thanks," he said. "I have other places to go before seeing the sheriff."

"Are you running away to join Dave? Are you scared?"

"I'm not scared any more than Dave was. No matter what you think, he never would have left this range if he hadn't lost something he thought was worth having. Any man can make mistakes, you know." Logan indicated the man in the grass at his feet. "Teal made one." Then Logan holstered the gun, doffed his sombrero to the girl, turned, slid down the bank to the creek, and waded upstream in foaming water in search of his horse. He found the sorrel about a hundred feet away, munching leaves, with its bridle caught under a rock. Mounting, he rode to his cabin.

There he pushed open the door and strode inside. Again there was a note on the table. This one, written in a smaller, finer hand than the other one, read:

> Teal is drinking again and threatening to kill you, Barney. Please be careful and don't let—

The note was unsigned.

But Barney Logan was not deceived. He knew who had scribbled those lines. Myra Clark had been here. She must have been writing the warning when she had heard the shooting in the creek. A strange sensation assailed Barney Logan. He walked swiftly to the door, but the slender rider on the gray horse already had passed out of the valley.

For a full minute Logan stood there, sharp little barbs of remorse annoying him. He regretted harsh words spoken to a girl who had ridden long miles to warn him of danger. He wished he had time to overtake her and make amends. But Jing Jenkins was waiting for him. Waiting to take up a man hunt that, if successful, might restore this valley to its rightful owners.

Coming up the valley to meet Logan, and then riding alongside him on a trail that led due west, old Jing Jenkins was grimly pleased to learn of Teal's defeat in a gun battle, but was a bit surprised at Myra Clark's warning.

FOR a long time he considered her note.

"Maybe she cares more for Dave than she thought," said Jenkins. "Maybe big

handsome Chris Farnham, breezin' into Promontory, with plenty money to flop down and buy a store, kind of dazzled the girl. Leastaways, she done what she could to save Dave's brother gettin' downed."

"Yeah," said Logan. "I shore hope we can find Dave. But they say Castle Rocks country is a hard place to find folks who don't want to be found."

"Which is why certain gents camp there," said Jing. "But it ain't entirely strange to me, kid. I camped in there for a year once."

"You?" Barney stared.

"Yeah. This last winter ain't the first tough one I've seen. There was another one a few years back which cleaned the range of cattle. I lost my ridin' job and couldn't flush another one. For a spell I lived best way I could in Castle Rocks until one night, I tried to hold a feller up. I didn't recognize him at first. But he was a man I'd rode with in better days—yore father. He brought me to Cache Valley with him and straightened me out."

Barney Logan was silent. His father had never mentioned this. Neither would the son. Jing Jenkins knew that.

It was mid-afternoon when the two riders reached the stone portals of "The Gate," a narrow passageway which led into the outlaw hangout Castle Rocks, a lonely land of twisting canyons and broken mesas hidden among the steep slopes of the Rimrock Mountains. A strange feeling of awe came over Logan as he entered this place, a country as wild as the lawless men who inhabited it.

Jing Jenkins led the way over steep rocky trails, along gloomy winding paths beneath dark pine trees, by furtive narrow trails bathed in shadow, up ridges, down slopes and past graveled clearings. But ever the general route led upward, toward the frowning mountain-peaks tipped with timeless snows. At sundown Barney Logan saw smoke lifting from the stone chimney of a cabin nestled in a wide part of a deep canyon. It proved to be an old cabin made of cedar, and with a garden patch below it. There was a long, narrow pasture, too, in which grazed a few goats, a few cattle and horses.

A shaggy, gray man stood on the cabin porch. His hand—he had only one arm—was close to his gun. And Barney Logan's sharp eyes could see the muzzle of another rifle protruding from the shadows beyond the open door.

"Hello, Crow," called out Jing Jenkins. "Long time no see." He kept his voice carefully casual, ignoring the alert preparations in the cabin.

"Jing—Jenkins," said Crow Talcott. "It's all right, Flower." Suspicion vanished. He came forward and shook hands greeting each visitor in turn.

Jenkins had told Logan about this old squawman who had once been an Indian agent. In a fight with two men who peddled liquor to the Indians, Crow Talcott had lost an arm, then his job and, becoming bitter, had run off with an Indian girl, Flower, who had nursed him. She was the fat, smiling woman with the graying braids of hair, who waddled out of the cabin clad in a loose wrapper, still holding the rifle. Flower leaned the rifle against the cabin, and grinned toothlessly.

"Old man now," she said, pointing at Talcott. "Fat like me." Her chin came up, indicating Logan. "Him look like—" She did not finish.

"Dave Logan?" Jenkins prompted. "You all seen Dave lately?"

Flower Talcott preferred not to answer. She turned and went into the house. The squawman grinned.

"She's lived here too many years to like answerin' questions," he said. "Dave'll be along pretty soon to pick up a couple loaves of bread. Unsaddle yore hosses. Eat supper with us."

That invitation was welcome to Barney. He felt tired and so was his horse. The smell of freshly-baked bread just taken from the oven made his mouth water a little.

Later Dave Logan appeared. With him came another rider—slim, hard-eyed Vance Hargrave, an outlaw Barney Logan had heard about but never seen. Together they rode up to the Talcott cabin. When Dave sighted Barney sitting on the porch in the dusk, his eyes lighted for a moment, and then sobered.

"What are you doing here, Barney," he demanded. "Maybe you and Jing have come to take me home?"

"Guess agin," said Jing. "We're lookin' for a gent named Pennington."

"Pennington?" Dave Logan echoed. He scowled. "So he did sell you those cattle?"

LOGAN remained silent while Jenkins explained about the deal. In doing so he mentioned Dave's note of warning.

"I delivered that," said Vance Hargrave. "While I was out huntin' a bay horse Pennington stole from me, along with four hundred dollars I had cached in a saddle blanket."

"You didn't find your bay horse," put in Barney Logan, and then told about killing Adrian Teal, and the bay horse he had ridden.

"Killin' Teal was a cussed good job," grunted the outlaw. "You say McWane's bank furnished the money for them beeves? That's funny. When I rode to Promontory a week ago to meet a couple of men, they told me McWane's bank wasn't worth robbin'."

"They must've been wrong," said Jing Jenkins.

"Nope, I think they was right," said Hargrave flatly. "My pards probably had it straight. Last winter busted a good many stockmen, and a lot of banks, too."

Much more talk followed that night on the porch of an old cabin in the Castle Rocks. It was nearly midnight when four men crawled into a pile of wild hay in a squawman's barn and went to sleep. After sun-up, the next morning, those same four men, Barney and Dave Logan, Jing Jenkins and Vance Hargrave rode out of the Castle Rocks and headed across the hills, a long trail that would eventually bring them to Promontory.

About three o'clock in the afternoon Barney Logan and Jing Jenkins trotted tired horses into the sleepy little town and tied them at the hitching rack in front of the Bobcat Saloon. They didn't go inside, but leaned against the rack pole, talking. Finally they started down the street toward the bank. Just as they reached the big town wooden watering trough, Chris Farnham, accompanied by McWane and a burly man, emerged from Farnham's store and headed across the street.

"Now what?" Jing Jenkins growled to Barney Logan. "That husky stranger is wearin' a tin star." Logan also scented trouble. His manner became alert.

"Just a minute, Logan," bellowed Chris Farnham. "This deputy, Pete Ostring, wants to see you." Logan halted.

"What about?" he asked. He kept his eyes on the deputy.

"The murder of Adrian Teal," said the big, hump-shouldered man named Ostring. "Some say he was ambushed out in Cache Valley."

"Some lie, don't they?" cut in the cold voice of Jing Jenkins.

"Just the same," said Farnham, "Ostring's takin' you to Oxyoke, Logan. If it's a lie, they'll find it out."

Barney Logan's manner had become hostile. He stared at the deputy with growing dislike.

"Nobody's taking me to Oxyoke," he drawled. "Not today, anyhow. Jing and me have got business at the bank. Strikes me as strange it's closed so early, and that McWane keeps hanging out around your place, Farnham. What has become of Pennington, the cattle thief. He should be hanging around here, too."

Farnham shot a swift glance at the banker, who spoke up quickly. "Pennington knows better than to show up in this town," snapped McWane. "We'll never see him again."

"Don't be too danged shore of that," retorted Jing Jenkins. "S'posin' he showed up whether he wanted to or not, without you expectin' it, McWane?"

The banker's thin lips twitched as he tried to meet the level gaze of these two men from Cache Valley. Jenkins' words had flustered him. Farnham seemed disturbed, too.

"Arrest these two men, Ostring," he cried in angry tones.

"You all didn't like Barney killin' yore ambushin' pard, Teal, did you, Farnham," jeered Jing Jenkins. "That riled you considerable, huh?"

"Idle talk," scoffed Farnham, making frantic motions for Ostring to hurry with his arrest. But Ostring was hesitating. He did not like the cold, deadly appearance of Barney Logan.

"There'll be more talk later," said Logan. "You're goin' to talk a lot, after my friends bring in Pennington.

AGAIN McWane and Farnham exchanged swift glances.

"Let 'em have it, boys," shouted Franham, suddenly. "Logan is resisting arrest and Jenkins is helping him."

With this, the big storekeeper whirled on his heel and started to run for the doorway of the nearest building.

CHAPTER V

Gunfight in Promontory

CHRIS FARNHAM'S abrupt action had taken both Logan and Jenkins by surprise. The storekeeper did not go for his gun or attempt to open any fight. Instead he turned and ran. But the mystery of his actions was soon dissipated.

Further away down the street, two men suddenly appeared, armed with rifles. They leveled these and opened fire. As one of the heavy slugs ripped through the loose part of his vest, Logan snatched out his six-gun and returned the shot, aiming at the nearest rifleman who tried to dodge back behind the lumber pile which had concealed him up to now. As the man near the lumber pile dropped with a bullet through his brain, Jing Jenkins' long-barreled pistol came up and thundered once. The second rifleman who was firing at the plainsman from behind a porch post, gave a sudden jump, dropped his weapon and slid face foremost down the wooden steps to land in a heap on the wooden boards of the sidewalk. He never moved again.

While this was occurring Ostring, the deputy, and McWane, the banker, were still standing nearby, as if petrified. Evidently they had been taken as much by surprise by Farnham's unexpected move as anyone. Now Ostring dug for his gun like a flash while McWane turned and fled. Logan, who was about to fire at Farnham, diverted the muzzle and snapped the hammer. Again the heavy forty-five boomed and Ostring flopped over on his back with a slug in his hip. Dropping his gun he put up his hands and began to beg for mercy.

But Logan and Jenkins were otherwise engaged. Other friends of Farnham appeared from doorways and commenced to cut into the fight. Logan and the plainsman ducked for cover, taking refuge behind the wooden water-trough. Bullets began to thud into it from all directions causing jets to spurt. Throwing off his hat, Logan cautiously peered around the edge of the trough.

Not much time had elapsed. Farnham was just about to enter his store while McWane was heading for the bank. Logan fired at Farnham, making another hit. The big storekeeper collapsed against the doorway, hung on for a moment and then slowly slithered down.

In the meantime old Jing Jenkins had been dodging bullets and sending bullets after McWane, but without much success. Now as Farnham straightened out at the door of his store the last slug in Jenkins' gun went ripping through the fleeing banker's leg and he tumbled flat in the dust. He remained where he had fallen, motionless.

Nevertheless things looked bad for the two men behind the watering trough. The odds were heavy. Too many men, with fast, accurate rifles had lined up against them and splinters from singing lead flew high in the air as they struck the heavy timbers. In a protracted siege, six-guns can never prevail against rifles. Logan and Jenkins were forced to hug the ground, seldom getting a chance to return the hostile fire. Jenkins' shoulder was reddening from a superficial wound and Logan had been burned by bullets several times. Unless something lucky occurred they would both be shot to ribbons.

At this precise moment that lucky event did occur. Two allies of the ranchers opened fire on the concealed friends of Farnham and McWane. They were Dave Logan and Vance Hargrave, both armed with Winchesters. Hargrave wore a mask but Logan and Jenkins recognized him at once. This intervention turned the tide of battle. There was quick interchange of rapid shots and then the hostile townsmen abandoned the fight. After all they had little reason to continue the battle, now that their three leaders had been put out of action. Afterward none of the Cache Valley ranchers could find out who they were.

Cautiously Barney Logan and Jing Jenkins arose to their feet and advanced to meet Dave Logan and the masked Vance Hargrave. Ostring was still begging for mercy in weak tones while near the bank, the cracked voice of McWane also was raised in a whimpering whine.

Vance Hargrave spoke to Barney Logan in hurried tones.

"You three go over there and make

McWane talk," he said. "It wouldn't do to let people know I'd fought with you. See you in Castle Rocks, Dave." Then the outlaw turned and ran toward his waiting horse. He limped a little, and red was on one leg of his overalls.

BARNEY and Dave Logan, and Jing Jenkins advanced across the street. Innocent looking men came from doorways and surveyed the scene of battle, seemingly friendly and regretful. Dave Logan pointed his gun at McWane.

"Talk up, banker," he said. "Tell these folks why you tried to shoot your way out today. Tell 'em how you framed up with Bob Pennington to steal a bunch of cattle and sell 'em to the Cache Valley ranchers. . . . Well, didn't you?"

"Yuh—yes," gulped the banker.

Alamo Paige Battles Against Desperate Owlhoots to Protect the One Big Strike of Two Old Prospectors—and to See That

THE MAIL MUST GO THROUGH

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By REEVE WALKER

Next Issue

"And no actual money changed hands in the deal, because your bank didn't have eighteen thousand," cut in Barney Logan. "That deal was all faked on paper. But the notes that me and my neighbors signed was genuine enough."

"I won't talk any more," answered the banker. "I'll have my lawyer manage things."

"There ain't time for that," Dave Logan said. "But there's time for me to kill you if you don't talk fast."

McWane knew that he was tottering on the brink of sudden death. Loss of blood from the wounded leg had helped to unnerve him, too. He talked. But he blamed Chris Farnham for everything. It was Farnham, he said, who had conceived the plan to gain possession of Cache Valley, an isolated, ideal range for the raising of purebred cattle. And Farnham's uncle, a wealthy man, was willing to buy such a range for a big price. Farnham had long been a friend of Bob Pennington. So had Adrian Teal.

In the meantime Jing Jenkins had gone over to see if he could force a similar confession from Farnham. Now he returned, shaking his head. The storekeeper was dead. Logan's bullet had torn through his lungs, a fatal wound.

"We'll have those notes back, McWane," said Barney. "All four of 'em. Jing and me will deliver Todd's and Tyler's."

"I can't walk," McWane protested. "They're locked in my desk in the bank."

"Give me your keys," said a girl's voice. "I'll get them."

Barney Logan looked around and saw Myra Clark, with pallid face, bend over and take a bunch of keys from McWane. Then she turned and ran toward the bank. "Look, there's Pennington," yelled Jing Jenkins.

Barney and Dave Logan whirled around. They saw Bob Pennington, his hands bound to the pommel of the saddle in which he sat. Two men riding on either side of him. They were Andy Todd and Herb Tyler.

"So the boys did get Pennington," grunted old Jing. "We only thought we was throwin' a bluff to Farnham and McWane before the fight. Now it turns out to be the truth."

Todd and Tyler rode up with their prisoner whom they had caught celebrating in a little town to the north. Old Jing began to fire questions at Pennington. And the answers confirmed McWane's story, that Chris Farnham had engineered the whole deal.

Myra Clark came running back down the street. "Here are your notes, Dave," she cried. "All four of them."

"Thanks," Dave Logan said to her.

"And thanks for trying to warn my kid brother about Teal the other day. I'm sorry that Farnham's layin' there—dead—if you really—loved him."

Barney Logan wondered what was wrong with his brother's voice. It was growing weak, hesitant. Suddenly Dave Logan's knees buckled and Barney, moving quickly, caught him, eased him to the earth. "Dave," he asked in alarm. "What's wrong?"

"I got more lead—than I could carry—here." He pressed hands to his stomach.

"Dave!" Myra Clark knelt beside Barney. "Quick, get Doctor Venable."

"Too late, he couldn't—h e l p me," gasped Dave Logan. "Gosh, Myra. You shore are—pretty. I'm glad—I could see you—once more—" His voice trailed off, and he lay quite still. Never again would Dave Logan ride back to Castle Rocks.

Slowly Myra Clark arose to her feet. Her eyes were misty with tears. . . .

LEAVING Jing Jenkins beside his brother, Barney L o g a n turned blindly away and walked off down the street. He failed to notice Chris Farnham's body when he passed it, for his fists were clenched and his heart felt as if it would burst. Also he did not see Vance Hargrave, at the edge of town, heading back to the hills, ignorant of what had happened to Dave Logan. Had he known it is probable it would not have affected him deeply. The life of an outlaw such as he was wild and reckless, punctuated with sudden deaths. His own end might come any moment. He had small time for retrospection.

For a long period Barney Logan continued to walk, forgetting all about his horse, still tied to the hitch-rail back in town. He was thinking of Dave and sought physical movement to assuage his grief. It was not until later that he recovered enough to note his surroundings. He was standing at the edge of Pine Creek, staring into the foaming water. A touch on his arm caused him to look up and he found Myra Clark beside him, her face softened with pity for him. "I'm sorry, Barney," she said. "Dave was as fine as they come."

"You're right," he answered. "But you turned him down for Farnham."

"I never loved Farnham, Barney. I never intended to marry him. It just seemed a way out of my promise to Dave. I never loved Dave, either. There was someone else."

Barney Logan did not ask the obvious question. Instead he looked at the creek again, gloom in his face.

"Some day you may guess the name of the man I love," said the girl in low tones. "Until then I must wait." She turned and found old Jing Jenkins, who had ridden from town bringing Logan's horse along, standing a few feet away.

"Don't go, Myra," said the old man. "Tell him what you told me. Tell Barney Logan that it's him you love—that you've always loved."

"What?" said Logan sharply. She had started to move away, but he reached out, caught her by the arm and stopped her. "Tell me, Myra."

"Dave loved me and I loved you," said the girl. "I couldn't tell him that. He might have hated you then. Now it's different."

Logan stood silent for a long moment. Events were happening too fast. His brain was whirling. At last the girl had made an effort to free herself.

"Let go of me, Barney," she pleaded.

"Not before you tell her what is in yore heart, lad," advised old Jenkins. "Now is the time to get things settled."

The girl's face lightened up with happiness. She turned to Logan.

"Barney," she said. "Is Jing right? Please tell me!"

Logan hesitated. Facing her clear eyes he found he could not lie.

"It doesn't seem loyal to Dave," he said, slowly. "A few hours ago, I'd have died before I'd admitted it."

The girl smiled with delight. Old Jing cleared his throat noisily.

"Well, I'm glad I horned in now," he said. "Guess I better get back to Andy Todd and Herb Tyler. They found out where we can buy some cattle, Barney, good cattle, this time. And from the gents that owns 'em. But I'll tell you all about that later. Right now, you and Myra talk things over. So long, Myra. See you out in Cache Valley one of these days."

"Cache Valley," murmured the girl. "Today has been hideous, Barney, but there'll be better days."

"Better days," he repeated, and gripped that little hand nestling in his.

The Cowboy Had a WORD for It!

By CHUCK STANLEY

The First in a New Series of Articles on Cowtown Palaver

PRACTICALLY every trade and business has its own special jargon. The cow country of the West is no exception. It is rich in words that puzzle a stranger, although they make plenty of sense to those who "savvy" them.

From the early days of the Texas trail drives up to Abilene and Dodge City in Kansas "cowboy talk" became almost a language of its own.

Many of the words the cowboy uses daily are contractions or Americanized versions of old Spanish terms. For example when the cowboy speaks of his "lariat" he is simply using a contraction of *"la reata,"* the Mexican expression for "rope." Literally it means "the tie back," a fitting name for a rope.

In the beginning a lariat generally referred to a picket rope. The early ones were often made of horsehair. The word caught on in the Southwest cattle regions and gradually came to mean more or less any rope the cowboy used for general purposes. The Northwestern cowpuncher, however, speaks of his "rope." Lariat is southwestern cowboy lingo.

Rough—and How!

"Bronc" or "broncho" is another word the cowboy inherited from the Spanish. In Spanish *"broncho"* means rough. Its original meaning is uppermost in the cowboy's mind when he applies the term "bronc" to wild, untamed, or hard to fork, unridden horses.

The person who made a business of breaking in unridden, wild or half wild horses speedily became known as a "bronchobuster." His was and is a special trade, requiring plenty of skill, iron nerve and likewise an iron constitution.

"Man-Killers" and Such

Incidentally a good bronchobuster usually does his gentling either inside an empty corral, or wherever he happens to be out on the range. But sometimes in special cases, or for exceptionally vicious horses—"man-killers" in cowboy talk—a "bronc stall" was set up, usually at the home ranch. This was a stout, narrow enclosure where the man-killer had just about room enough to stand and in which he could be securely tied.

In a bronc stall a mean horse had no chance to bite or kick the person gentling him. "Gentling" is cowboy for taming an unbroken or untrained horse.

Most everybody knows the favorite cowboy tune about the "little dogies" that are going to have a new home. The

Throw Yore Loop on Some Waddy Lingo!

word "dogies," however, although it is frequently very loosely used is not interchangeable with "cattle." A dogie is just a poor, pathetic, weak-kneed, skinny-looking scrub calf that hasn't wintered well and all too plainly shows the effects of scant forage during the winter months. A "maverick" is an unbranded calf.

Down in the rough brush country of Texas in the old days of the Texas longhorns, brush cattle were known as "brush splitters" and the cowboys who "choused" or chased them out of the thorny thickets were frequently called "brush-poppers."

A "mossy horn" was a critter so old its horns "had moss on 'em" and usually referred to an old longhorn. The later

Herefords brought in to breed for better beef than the old original longhorn stock provided were generally called "white faces" or "blaze faces."

Though a herd may be bone dry and grazing under the hot sun of Texas or Arizona it is known as "wet stock" if it has been smuggled across the border from Mexico. Such stock was generally stolen from its rightful Mexican owners in the first place.

The stolen herds were driven to the Border and forced to cross the Rio Grande at desolate spots in many instances. Hence the term "wet." The cattle got drenched in making the river crossing.

The animals dried out quickly enough, but the name stuck. They were "wet stock." Fooling with them in any way, shape or form was risky business.

"She-Stuff"

When a cowboy speaks of a herd of cows he really means cattle in general. He doesn't use the term the way a dairy farmer would, for instance. If he wants to refer specifically to a "lady cow" he usually calls the critter "she-stuff."

There is a Spanish word that means a loud noise, *"estampida."* So when cattle or horses that had been bunched or herded together broke into unrestrained

flight or suddenly ran wild from fright the early Spaniards in the Southwest used this word both as a noun and a verb to describe the action. American cowboys call the thing itself a "stampede" and speak of the stock as "stampeding."

A stampede, particularly at nighttime, during a cattle drive was always dreaded by the cowboy. They could be terrible things brought on by the most trivial cause. Sometimes the barking of a coyote, the sudden snap of a twig, might be enough to bring some wild-eyed steer to his feet in terror. Another instant and the whole herd is aroused, panting and bellowing in fear, ready to follow headlong the first animal that makes a break.

In the resultant melée stock were often killed and sometimes a brave cowboy attempting to head off the rush, or turn the herd was caught and trampled to death beneath the thundering hoofs of the maddened beasts before comrades could come to his rescue.

"Stampede" was so vivid a term in cowboy talk that it has come into our language meaning a sudden rush of humans to a new locality as well as a cattle flight. For instance, the stampede of miners and prospectors to a new bonanza gold diggings.

The Remuda

Another colorful word in the lingo of the cow country is "remuda." Working cattle on the range, or on the long trail drives, each cowboy needed several horses or remounts. The number usually varied from five to ten per man. This often fairly large group of horses formed the "remuda" taken from the Spanish word *"remonta."*

A horse that had the bad habit of leaving the remuda at roundup or branding time in the old days of the open

range was generally known as a "bunch quitter." He quit the bunch and headed for home, or parts unknown at every chance he got. Bunch quitters could give a lot of trouble to the "hoss wrangler," the man whose duty it was to keep the horse herd together and see that fresh animals were on hand when and where they were needed by the cowboys.

The "roundup," of course, means just what it implies—the rounding up or gathering ("bunching" cowboys usually call it) of cattle. This was and is generally done twice a year. In the spring roundup the new calf crop is branded, or marked with its owner's special designation.

Brands are a whole subject in themselves, too lengthy for detailing in this present piece.

The second annual roundup is the fall or "beef roundup," made for the purpose of gathering stock ready for shipment. Late calves or those missed at the spring roundup are also branded at this time.

Old-Time Corrals

Nowadays most any pen, or fenced-in enclosure, used around a ranch to hold riding stock or cattle is called a "corral." Strictly speaking this isn't correct. Originally a "corral" had to be *circular* in form. They were built thus so that there were no corners into which an animal could pin a man and his horse, or into which they could jam themselves and turn at bay.

Moreover, herds being shoved into a square or rectangular pen could crowd and injure a cow in the corners. The rounded corral let the herd flow into the pen until it was filled.

Old-time corrals were built of strong, wooden rails lashed to firmly set, upright posts with strips of green rawhide. The rawhide contracting as it dried held the fence rails rigid.

"Vaquero" from *"vaca"* the Spanish word for "cow" is the Spanish and Mexican term for a cowboy. In the States it became "buckaroo," a word used more in some sections of the cow country than others. Nevada uses it to a certain extent.

"Cow puncher" or sometimes "cowpoke" are terms derived from the cowboy's often heated use of the metal-pointed stick he frequently has to wield in urging cattle from the loading pens into railroad stock cars. The stick itself, a pole about six feet long, is officially a "prod pole."

They Don't Punch Horses

At any rate, a cowboy is often called a "cowpuncher" and cowboys either herd or "punch" cattle. They don't however "punch" horses. Horses are always spoken of as being "herded."

"Tenderfoot" is an interesting word in cowboy talk. It applies to newcomers, strangers in the cow country and usu-

ally to strangers from the East. The name was, however, originally given not to persons but to cattle, imported to the western range.

Many of these cattle, not as tough as the stringy old longhorns accustomed to open country grazing conditions, suffered from bad feet at first. Such an animal was promptly dubbed a "tenderfoot" by the cowboys.

And so were the two-legged "animals" that came out to visit or live in the West later.

In cowboy jargon the accepted plural of "tenderfoot" is "tenderfoots," not tenderfeet. Human "tenderfoots" were also known as "pilgrims."

Hustle, Bustle and Rustle

"Rustle" and "rustler" are two words that have undergone marked changes in meaning in the cowboy's vocabulary. Time was when the horse wrangler was commonly known as the "hoss rustler" and thought nothing about it. He "rustled" the horses from place to place.

In those days "rustle" and "hustle" meant about the same thing. A "rustler" was a hustler, a person who was active and vigorous and jumped into a job with plenty of vim.

Cowboys still speak of "rustling up a meal," and they don't mean stealing it. They mean getting it ready, in jig time.

After a time some of these enterprising "rustlers" got too enterprising. They "rustled" stock, horses or cattle, that was not their own. Neither did it belong to the person they perchance were working for.

After that, "rustling" took on a more sinister connotation. Eventually a "rustler" was a plain cow thief and calling a man one meant exactly that pretty much throughout the cow country.

Boot Hill

Also on the shady side are "road agents," or "holdup artists." The name was specifically applied to thieves, often killers—who held up and robbed the early day stagecoaches. Some "road agents" rose to top positions in their profession and were known and feared throughout the country in which they ranged.

Many of those that weren't eventually hung or sentenced to long terms in prison "died with their boots on" and were buried in "boot hill," cowboy name for a wild, cowtown's cemetery.

An "outlaw" in the cow country was

a man whose deeds had put him outside the law. The word was also a favorite in describing some exceedingly vicious horse or steer.

A cowboy doesn't carry things. He "packs" them. He may come into town "packing" a gun on his hip, or he may "pack" his "tree" (saddle) across the street to the saddle maker's.

Wherever he went, whatever he did the cowboy had a word for it. The examples we have given are just a few. There are many more. Added together they make up the pithy, colorful lingo of the western cow country—cowboy talk.

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Convict 2022 Takes the Vengeance Trail on a Quick-Trigger Pasear for Vindication in

THE COWBOY FROM YUMA

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

A Gripping Complete Novelet Next Issue

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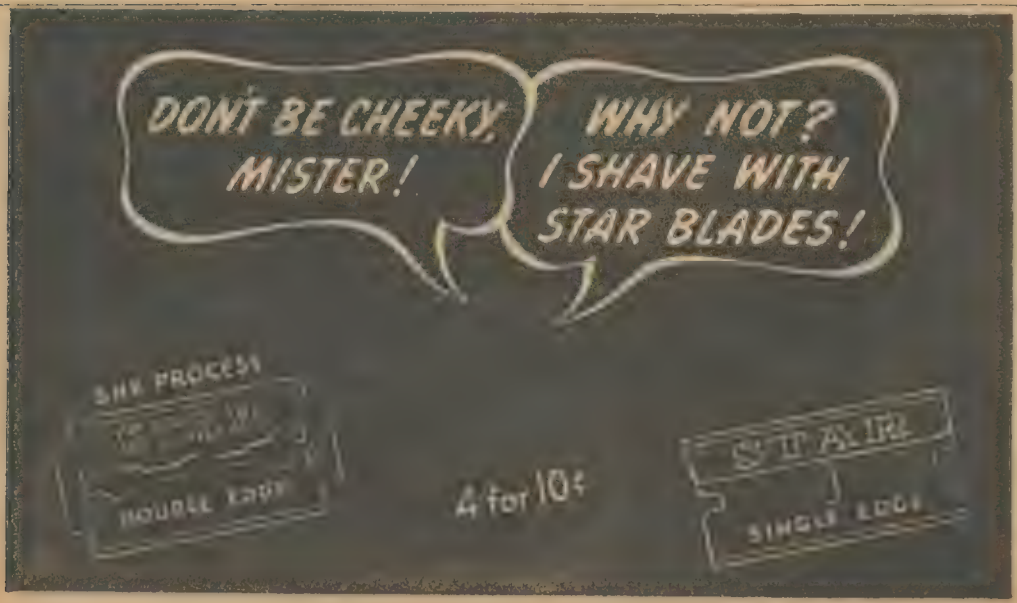

Paige knocked Barton back against the table

BLIZZARD MAIL

By REEVE WALKER

Abandoned to a Slow Death in a Raging Storm by the Outlaw Band Known as the White Wolves, Alamo Paige Returns to Cheyenne in Time to Bait a Trap for a Passel of Renegades!

THE northeaster had come up suddenly, filling the Wyoming sky with sullen gray clouds. The wind drove the snow in wild flurries that swiftly covered the rugged Western country beneath a blanket of white.

The wiry little rider on the swift moving pony shivered as the cold bit through his buckskin jacket. His flat-crowned Texas style sombrero was soggy from the wet snow. The gloved fingers of the right hand that held the reins felt numb from the cold and yet he rode steadily onward.

There was determination in the clear blue eyes that peered through the snow flakes ebbing about him for Alamo Paige, Pony Express rider, was determined to get the mail through to Cheyenne by nightfall.

"Shore has turned into a regular blizzard," he muttered, the words almost

driven back into his throat by a stiff blast of wind. "Didn't figger on it turnin' cold so soon or I'd have dressed a heap warmer than this."

Over an hour ago he had been supplied with a fresh horse at the Russel, Majors and Waddell pony station at Buffalo Lick. There had been little sign of a storm when he had ridden away from the town. The northeaster had crept up on him, then suddenly lashed out in all its fury.

Alamo Paige knew that the run he was making was doubly important, for not only was there vital mail in the *mochila* pouches tied to his saddle, but he was carrying an important letter to the commanding officer at the United States Army Headquarters in Cheyenne.

As the snow grew deeper beneath the hoofs of his mount Paige slowed his fleet pony. He had to get the mail through and he knew he would never succeed in doing so by keeping the horse going at such a swift pace that it would finally die of exhaustion.

Sweeping around a bend in the trail where it circled the edge of a ravine, he muttered a startled oath as he caught sight of a black blotch that was dimly visible through the shimmering white wall of snow.

"It's the Overland stage," he said. "But it's way off the route. The stage road is about a mile north of here."

A feeling of uneasiness swept over him as he rode closer to the motionless coach. The sensation increased when he saw the animals in the six-horse team lying stark and motionless in the snow.

There was no one up on top of the box. But the still figure of a man sprawled face downward in the white drift near the left front wheel.

ALAMO PAIGE realized that there must be as little delay as possible in reaching his destination. Yet, something like this grim scene before him at least permitted a few minutes time spent in investigation.

"Might be somebody here wounded that I could help," he decided as he swung out of the saddle.

He went to the door of the coach after tying the reins of his pony to the left rear wheel of the stage. The snow crunched softly beneath his moccasin-clad feet, while the drifting flakes clung to his buckskin pants and hung on the fringe running down either leg.

He drew open the door of the coach and found himself staring directly at the muzzle of a gun that was aimed at his head.

The dark eyes of the man who sat huddled down on the back seat of the coach glared at him wildly. The hand that held the long-barreled Colt trembled a little from cold.

"What's the idea?" snapped Alamo Paige. "Why are yuh coverin' me with that gun."

"Yuh're one of them," the man on the seat whispered in a weak voice. "One of the White Wolves—but yuh'll never get me to tell yuh when the gold is comin' through!"

"White Wolves!" exclaimed Paige. "Who are you? What are yuh talkin' about?"

"I'm Dan Carter. They sneaked up like the wolves they are—came out of the storm—and killed the driver and guard. They left me for dead, but I fooled them."

Alamo Paige saw that Carter was old. There was dried blood on his forehead. Evidently he had been creased by a bullet and left for dead by those who had attacked the stage when he had been merely unconscious.

"You've figgered me wrong if yuh think I'm one of the gang of killers," said Paige. "I'm Alamo Paige of the Pony Express."

"Alamo! Remember the Alamo," muttered Carter. "Don't let—White Wolves get away—not the Sioux—like people think—"

The hand that held the gun lowered slowly as the old man gasped out the words. Carter shuddered and the Colt dropped from his lifeless fingers.

Alamo Paige climbed quickly into the coach. It took only a moment to check the old man's pulse and heart beat. There was none. Dan Carter was dead.

Worried thoughts raced through the pony express rider's brain. What had Carter meant when he spoke of the White Wolves and said they were not the Sioux? Paige knew that there were rumors that the Ogallala Sioux Indians in this part of the country were on the warpath.

It was a message to the commanding officer at the Army headquarters in Chey-

enne about Indian trouble in the district that Paige was carrying in the mail pouch. He had been told the importance of the letter when it had been given to him in Julesburg. Orders that would start the troops out to put down the Indian uprising.

There had been raids on ranches in the wild Western country not far from the town of Buffalo Lick. Many people had died in this region from a smallpox plague and those remaining were not powerful enough to battle the Sioux, should the Indians attack in full force.

"Shore sounded like Carter was trying to tell me it is the White Wolves and not the Sioux that have been causin' all the trouble around here," said Paige as he left the coach and headed for his horse.

He unfastened the reins, finding it hard to do because of the wet snow. He wiped the snow off the saddle with the sleeve of his buckskin jacket and swung into the kak.

SEVERAL minutes later he was again heading in the direction of Cheyenne. The snow was now almost a foot deep and still coming down steadily. But the wind had slackened a little and the temperature seemed to be rising.

Alamo Paige was sure that he had not wasted more than twenty minutes in stopping to see what had happened at the stage. With luck he would reach his destination by night.

At the pony express station in Cheyenne another rider would take over to carry the mail on farther westward. Paige's part of the journey would be over. There were stage stations every fifteen miles where he would be supplied with a fresh horse—but he would have to make the ride.

He moved restlessly in the saddle for he was cold and uncomfortable. The elkhide belt buckled at his waist carried a holstered Dragoon revolver, a bowie knife, and the accessories for his cap and ball six-gun—brass powder flask, and pouches for leaden balls and percussion caps. Even at that he was well within the maximum of eighteen pounds allowed a pony express rider for saddle and weapons.

In a sudden lull in the storm Alamo Paige distinctly heard the ominous crackle of gunfire. A rider loomed into view. The horse was speeding through the snow and the man in the saddle was looking anxiously back over his shoulder.

"Looks like that hombre is headin' away from trouble," mused Alamo Paige.

The other rider was some distance off to Paige's left and the express messenger made no attempt to halt his own mount. He could see that the other man was big and wore a gray hat and a sheepskin coat.

Suddenly a group of riders appeared behind the fleeing man. At first, it was hard to distinguish them clearly for there were ten of them and every one of them was mounted on a white horse and dressed in white clothing. White hoods hid their heads and faces.

"The White Wolves!" exclaimed Paige as they came closer. "At least that's who I figger they are. I better get away from here pronto. Those masked hombres just might take it into their heads to interfere with the U. S. mail."

A loud yell issued from the White Wolves as they saw him and swung mounts in his direction. Grimly Paige urged his tiring horse to a faster gait.

Then abruptly his pony slid and stumbled. Alamo Paige went flying out of the saddle to land head-first in a snow drift. By the time he managed to struggle out and wipe the snow from his face and eyes he found himself surrounded by the White Wolves.

"It's the pony express rider," said a hooded man who appeared to be the leader of the band. "I've seen him before —feller named Alamo Paige."

Paige said nothing. Three of the band were covering him with their guns. He knew it would be useless for him to make any attempt to reach for his own weapon.

The rider that the White Wolves had been chasing had disappeared in the storm. Paige looked thoughtfully at the leader's boots. While all of the men were dressed in white trousers and heavy white coats their boots were typical cowboy footgear. Most of them were black, plain but very practical.

The leader wore fancy cordovan boots of brown leather with elaborate stitching. Paige was sure he would recognize those boots if he ever saw them again.

"Maybe we'd better take a look at the mail this hombre is carrying," said the

leader of the gang. "Catch his hoss, Jack."

One of the men rode over to where Paige's pony had halted a little distance away, with head down and tail between its legs as it stood with its back to the wind.

The man who went after it had no difficulty in grabbing up the pony's reins at the bit without getting out of the saddle. He led the horse back to the rest of the gang.

"Leave that mail alone," snapped Paige, his eyes flashing angrily as the leader of the White Wolves reached for the nearest mochila pouch. "Yuh're interferin' with government business."

"Maybe he's right," said one of the other men. "We've got to be careful, segundo."

"Ain't scared are yuh, Bill?" The leader's eyes glittered through the holes in his mask. "We don't want hombres that are too cautious ridin' with us."

HE HANDED the reins of his horse to one of the other men and swung out of the saddle. He walked toward Alamo Paige. He was half a head taller and at least twenty pounds heavier than the pony express rider.

"Yuh don't know who I am, Paige," he said. "But I never did like yuh. Always figgered I'd enjoy givin' yuh a good punch in the jaw."

"Try it!" said Paige grimly.

The big man had a Colt in a holster on either hip. He swaggered forward through the snow as Alamo Paige waited tensely. The big man shot a fist at Paige's face. The pony express rider leaped nimbly to one side and caught the leader's arm before he could draw it back.

Paige gave a twist that swung the White Wolves chief around so that his back was toward the man he had tried to strike. In two lightning-like moves of his hands Paige released his grip on the big man's arms and snatched the leader's guns out of the holsters.

In a moment Paige was standing with the barrel of one gun pressed against the big man's back, the leader's body shielding the pony express rider from the rest of the hooded men. The gun in Paige's right hand covered the White Wolves.

"Make any foolish moves and this hombre gets a bullet in his back," Paige called out grimly.

"Careful, men," said the leader anxiously. "I don't want to stop lead." He looked at the three men who were still holding guns in their hands. "Don't take any chances."

Alamo Paige grinned sardonically as he detected a note of fear in the big man's voice. Evidently the leader of the pack was only brave when the odds were all on his side. Paige realized that while he held the upper hand at the moment it would doubtlessly not be for long. After all he was only one man against ten.

The snow still fell steadily, making it difficult for him to watch all of the men in front of him. He tried to be on the alert for any unexpected move. But when it came it proved to be something that he was not ready for at all.

"Drop those guns!" commanded a voice behind him.

Paige risked a glance over his shoulder. Behind him was the man in the sheepskin coat who had apparently been fleeing from the White Wolves a little while ago. He was covering Alamo Paige with a six-gun as he sat in the saddle.

The snow had muffled the sound of the rider's horse as he had ridden closer so that Paige had not realized the man was approaching.

"Nice work, Barton," grunted the big leader of the band as he, too, glanced over his shoulder, then swung around and swiftly grabbed the two guns out of Alamo Paige's hands. "Good idea of yore's havin' us pretend to chase yuh."

"Apparently brains are needed in this outfit when yuh all let one man get the drop on ten." There was cold contempt in Barton's voice. He was lean-faced and hard looking. "I saw the way this hombre proved too much for you, Gary."

"Told yuh never to use my name at a time like this," snarled the big man. "And I'm still boss of this outfit, Barton."

"You've been usin' my name right regardless," said Barton coldly. "As for bein' boss that could be changed in time."

Alamo Paige listened with interest. In his estimation this Barton was a far more dangerous man than was the leader of the White Wolves.

He also felt that his having learned the

names of these two men was vital for future reference. If he managed to get away it would enable him to identify the two men later.

It was typical of Alamo Paige that he gave no thought of defeat, even though at present the odds were all against him.

"Come here," Barton said, his eyes fixed on Paige. "I want to talk to yuh."

PAIGE stepped close to the big bay horse that Barton was riding. Barton leaned over as though to tell Paige something he did not want the other men to hear. Instinctively Alamo Paige moved even closer.

The gun barrel of the Colt in Barton's hand crashed down on Paige's head with such force that the pony express messenger dropped to the snow unconscious.

It was quite some time afterwards when he finally opened his eyes. He found that he was still lying in the spot where he had fallen and he was half buried in the snow. He struggled to a sitting position and looked around him.

Barton, Gary and the White Wolves were gone. But to his surprise Paige saw that his own pony was still standing ground-hitched not far away.

"Looks like they figgered on leavin' me here to freeze to death," he muttered as he got to his feet and brushed the snow off his clothing. "That way it would look as if my hoss threw me and I was knocked out and died in the storm. No one would ever be accused of killin' a pony express rider."

He went to the horse and climbed into the saddle. He was weak from the blow and half frozen. He found that the mochila pouches were still fastened to the saddle and appeared intact. Apparently the White Wolves had changed their minds about examining the pony express mail.

It had stopped snowing, but the drifts were deep. The air had turned cold again, penetrating his heavy clothing. Angry and grim, Alamo Paige rode on in the direction of Cheyenne. He reached the town just after nightfall and headed for the express station. Although he was weak from cold and exhaustion, he had brought the mail in.

Another pony express rider had been waiting impatiently to continue the trip farther westward and he left as soon as the mail had been sorted and the letters for Cheyenne left behind at the mail window in the station.

After having been thoroughly thawed out in front of a stove in the station and drinking two cups of hot coffee, Alamo Paige felt much better. He went to the mail window to assure himself that the letter to the U. S. Army commanding officer had been delivered.

"Did Colonel Kesler get the letter I brought for him?" Paige asked the man at the mail window. "I was told it was right important."

There had been a number of men at the window getting their mail and Paige saw that one of them was a big moon-faced individual who wore brown cordovan boots. So this was Gary, the leader of the White Wolves without his mask!

Gary looked at Paige as though he had never seen him before, then swaggered to the door of the express station without a second glance at the pony express messenger. Yet Paige was sure that he had caught just the faintest flicker of alarm in the big man's eyes.

Obviously Gary had never again expected to see Alamo Paige alive, since the pony express rider had been left to freeze to death in the storm.

Paige was sure that his life was in constant danger from this moment on. He knew Gary and Barton's names and they would not let him remain alive if they could possibly help it.

Paige decided that he had better see Colonel Kesler and tell him the whole story at once. There was a good chance of the troops being called out to put down an uprising of the Sioux Indians whereas it actually was the White Wolves band that had been causing all of the trouble.

He stepped out into the street with the intention of heading for the fort. Before he could move more than a few feet a man suddenly loomed on either side of him. A gun was thrust into his side and he halted abruptly.

"Keep walking, Paige," came the cold voice of Barton from his left. "Don't stop."

"Yeah," said Gary from his right. "Head on down the street. Yuh won't get away so easily this time."

IT WAS dark, and the street was almost deserted since the storm had

driven the townspeople indoors. Paige was sure that if he tried to get away from the two men they would merely shoot him down in cold blood and disappear into the shadows between the buildings.

He walked on with Barton and Gary on either side of him, conscious that every step he took brought him closer to doom. His brain was working swiftly, desperately, seeking the slightest chance of escape.

"Too bad we were mistaken about this hombre freezin' to death, Slug," Gary said. "Still it was yore idea. I wanted to put a bullet in him out there on the trail."

"Yuh always want to take the easiest way, Joe," said Barton. "That's why I figger yuh won't be bossin' the pack long."

"Still aimin' to take over, eh?" Gary said bitterly, but it was obvious that he was a bit afraid of Barton. "Well, don't be too sure that yuh will."

They walked on until they reached a dark shack at the outskirts of the town. Gary stepped forward and unlocked a padlock on the door with a key while Barton kept his gun pressed against Alamo Paige's side.

"All right," Gary said. "Step inside, Paige, and don't try anythin' foolish."

Paige entered the shack with Barton following close behind him. Barton closed the door from the inside and Gary held a match to the wick of an oil lamp. The light flared up. Paige saw that the windows of the shack had been boarded up from the inside.

"We read the letter that was sent to Colonel Kesler," said Barton casually. "Then sealed it up again and let it go through. Suits us fine to know the Army figgers the Sioux are back of all the trouble in this region."

"Tellin' him a lot, ain't yuh, Slug?" demanded Gary anxiously. "Maybe it ain't wise after the way Paige showed up again last time."

"He's not going to live long enough," said Barton grimly. He removed his sheepskin coat and there was a bowie knife in a sheath on his belt. "We won't use a gun on him—too much noise." He grinned wolfishly. "But I'm right handy with a knife."

"Yuh mean yore gonna stab him to death?" Joe Gary looked horrified.

"No, I'll give him a chance for his life." Slug Barton looked at the knife in Alamo Paige's belt. "That fair enough, Paige?"

"Suits me." Paige nodded.

"Take his gun, Joe," ordered Barton. "And then get out of here. I'll see yuh later. Remember the White Wolves are ridin' again before morning."

"Yeah, I know," said Gary as he took Alamo Paige's Dragoon Colt out of the holster. "Those were my orders. We'll gather at the usual place at the south end of the town. Yuh better come masked, Slug."

"All right," said Barton. "Now get goin' and let me finish this hombre."

The door closed behind Gary as he departed. Paige and Barton stood in the center of the shack watching each other warily, their right hands on the hilt of the knives on their belts.

Abruptly Barton's knife flashed out as he leaped toward Paige. The keen blade would have pierced the pony express rider's heart if Alamo Paige had not jumped nimbly to one side. His own bowie knife came up, aimed at a spot just above Barton's belt. The lean faced man blocked the blow with his arm, knocking Paige's wrist aside.

BARTON cursed and lunged again at Alamo Paige. His knife flashed by Paige's left ear. The express messenger's bowie pierced Barton's chest but did not plunge deep as the other man drew away.

"Figger yuh're a real knife fighter, don't yuh," Barton panted. "I'll show yuh!"

Paige did not waste any breath in words. They closed in. Each man held the other by using his left arm, while he tried to find a vital spot for the knife in his right.

Barton broke free and Paige knocked him back against the table on which the oil lamp stood. The table overturned and the lamp crashed to the floor. The wick sputtered, then went out, plunging the shack into darkness.

Alamo Paige leaped to one side as Barton's knife cut his upper arm. Then there was a thud and a groan.

"Fell on his own knife and plunged it right into his heart," came a voice out of the darkness a moment later. "Good

(Continued on page 88)

Red whipped off his sombrero and sent his spirited horse racing up and down the dusty street

OUTLAW BAIT

By DIXON WELLS

Forbidden to Carry Firearms, Red Hutton Brings an Avalanche of Grief Down Upon Rustlers Who Catch Him Gunless on the Range!

RED HUTTON should have remembered that Judge Hiram Case was allergic to noise, especially since the judge ran the town of Buzzards' Roost to suit himself. But Hutton was feeling too good to remember trifles like that.

A month on the range had whetted his appetite for excitement and a month's pay in his jeans was begging to be spent, burned up, or tossed away.

Consequently, as he rode into Buzzards' Roost Red Hutton gave vent to his joy in no uncertain terms.

"Yippee!" he howled, his serious face belying the mirth that bubbled within him. "I'm a ring-tailed catamount and I'm itchin' for action!"

Red whipped off his sombrero and sent his spirited horse racing up and down the dusty street.

Then the gaudy false fronts of the buildings caught his eye. He yanked out his six-gun and began a determined, but fruitless effort to shoot out the glass of the painted windows in the second stories.

Just as the hammer clicked down on an empty shell, he was interrupted. A lass-rope dropped around his shoulders and snapped taut. Red Hutton had only time for a strangled yelp.

"Hey! Look out—"

Then he was snatched from his saddle and landed in the dusty roadway with a bounce that drove the breath out of him and made him see several interesting varieties of stars, planets, comets and

assorted constellations. He felt himself being dragged inside a building.

The man in the moon, too," he murmured dizzily.

The Man in the Moon opened his mouth and produced an angry roar. He sounded insulted.

Red Hutton shook his head. His eyes cleared. The round face wavering before him steadied, but the mouth kept moving.

With a shudder the cowboy recognized the angry red face of Judge Hiram Case, dictator of Buzzards' Roost.

The judge's face was a thundercloud. His jowls danced with rage. Hutton quailed beneath the lightning of his glare.

"I've warned yuh, Red Hutton, that I'll tolerate no lawlessness in this town! I won't have you gravy-brained cow nurses shooting off yore cannons under my window. I find yuh guilty of disturbin' the peace, wreckin' private property, incitin' to riot, resistin' an officer and conductin' a parade without a license! Got anythin' to say?"

"I—"

"Guilty! I sentence yuh to be tossed into the calaboose to cool off yore high spirits over night. The marshal will return yore gun when yuh leave town, which I hope is pronto, and yuh ain't ever to wear it again in Buzzards' Roost."

Never known to be a timid soul, Red Hutton rebelled.

"DOGGONE it, that ain't fair!" he protested. "Now look here, Judge. You can't take a man's shootin' iron away from him like that! I'd feel plumb naked without it. Besides it ain't safe. Besides, everybody'd laugh me right out of town!"

"I devoutly hope so," the judge said grimly.

"Well I ain't a-goin' to do it!" Hutton snapped.

"No?" The judge's red jowls clicked shut. "That's contempt of court. I could keep yuh in jail till yuh stepped on yore whiskers for that, but danged if I aim to feed yuh. Instead, I'm goin' to change yore sentence.

"Instead of spendin' the night in jail, yuh're under sentence from this here court to keep the peace and not to wear a gun for thirty days. That goes for the range as well, not only for town.

"If I hear that yuh've been wearin' a gun anywhere in this county for the next thirty days, in the clink yuh go and yuh stay there until yore grandchildren bail you out!"

A loud guffaw came from the back of the court. Hutton whirled. Several cowboys were there enjoying the scene. He spun back to the judge, fists clenched.

"Listen, Judge," he protested. "I need that gun! I'm ridin' night herd on the Bar J roundup tomorrow! Suppose there's a stampede or something? Why, the boys will think—"

"You should have thought of that before yuh cut loose," the judge said, unmoved.

Hutton spun on the grinning marshal at his side.

"Jed, give me my shootin' iron!"

He lunged at the six-gun the marshal held in his hand.

The officer stepped back and cracked him across the knuckles with the barrel of the gun. Hutton yelped. The appreciative audience roared with enjoyment.

His face a furious red, the cowboy whirled and stamped his way out. As he approached the door, the little group of onlookers made way for him, grinning.

Slash Grew, a hulking waddy with a perpetual three-day bristle on his face, hailed him.

"Never mind, Red," he cooed. "I'll get yuh a beanshooter!"

Hutton's fists doubled and he half swung towards Grew. Then he changed his mind and kept going. As the door slammed behind him, Grew motioned some of the men aside.

"Did yuh hear what he said about ridin' night herd on the Bar J stock tomorrow?"

"Yeah, Slash, and he can't carry a gun!"

"It's a perfect set-up," Grew chortled. "We'll slide in and lift those critters right from under his nose. He won't be able to fight. He won't even be able to signal for help without a shootin' iron! Scatter now, and I'll meet yuh later to arrange the final details."

Red Hutton, meanwhile, got his horse and rode straight out of town, unconscious of the strong interest his plight had aroused. His holster was empty, his

pocket was full of unspent cash and his ears burned with the parting jibes of the town—jibes he was helpless to avenge.

In spite of his temper, he knew better than to defy Judge Case openly, however. The judge meant every word he said and he had a very tough marshal to back him up. Red Hutton had no desire to spend a month in jail.

His waist line was innocent of gun-belt, therefore, when he took his place as night hawk on the Bar J the following night. The cattle were bedded down, the night was calm and still. Hutton rode around the herd slowly, crooning a doleful range ballad.

Oh, my darlin' you have said we have to part,
And you know that you have nearly broken my heart.
You say you've found another, that you'll like me like a brother,
But you know that I have loved you from the start.

THE voice was a little scratchy but the sentiments were pure, for Red Hutton was feeling as low as the hero of his song.

Without warning a group of horsemen appeared out of the dark, trotting easily toward him. They came so openly that Hutton never suspected trouble. Only when two riders came straight for him while the others began to split up around the herd did he take alarm.

"Hey! What're you hombres doing? Get away from that herd!"

"Stand hitched, cowboy," growled a rough voice, "and yuh won't get hurt."

The riders loomed on either side of him. A gun shone dully in the hand of one. Both men had bandannas over their faces and their hats were pulled low.

The other riders began urging the herd to its feet with shouts and cracking rope ends.

"Hey!" Red Hutton bellowed in anguish. "You can't do that!"

His hand unconsciously slapped down to his hip, but neither gun nor holster were there. Desperately he whirled on the gun-toting rustler, grabbed at his weapon.

The gun jerked away from him, darted up and down. The heavy barrel caved in his sombrero, glanced with jarring force off his skull.

Hutton saw the sky wheel over and

[*Turn page*]

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the black earth rise swiftly to meet him. He didn't even feel the jar as his body hit the ground.

Minutes later he opened his eyes. He was lying on his back and staring at the night sky and a throbbing pain was playing leap-frog in his head. For a moment he stared uncomprehendingly upward. Then the distant bawl of cattle came faintly to his ear and with it, memory came back in a rush.

Painfully, he hauled himself to his feet. A dark silhouette stood nearby with hanging head. A cow the rustlers had missed? No, it was his horse.

With renewed hope, Red Hutton staggered toward his horse. The animal watched his looping gait suspiciously, but for once did not try any funny stuff.

Hutton mounted gingerly and headed toward the distant sound of the herd. The horse's gait jarred his skull as though his brain were loose and bouncing around, but he gritted his teeth and took it. Nor did he forget to leave plenty of sign for the Bar J cowboys to follow when they discovered the herd was gone.

Dawn had come by the time Red Hutton unraveled the trail of the herd. The cows had been driven back into the badlands at a good rate of speed and taken over a stretch of malpais which eliminated all tracks.

Only the fact that he had been within earshot all the way enabled him to follow. Trackers would have been thrown off completely.

The cows had then been herded into a blind canyon with water and grass, where a single man could easily control them. The rest of the outlaws had gone on to their hideout.

And now, with the first rays of the sun darting over the eroded shapes of the gaunt hills, Red Hutton perched on a ledge and stared at the bandits' cabin.

It was tucked against the foot of the cliff he had just climbed and was almost directly below him. A thin pale thread of smoke rose into the air and vanished, evidence that the rustlers were getting themselves some breakfast.

Red Hutton rubbed his own empty belly and considered his next move. There was a good-sized boulder on the ledge near him and it was perched rather precariously. If he could move it—

He tried it with his shoulder. It swayed. He pushed again and the sway was more pronounced. Then he went to work in earnest.

The boulder was rocking dangerously in a few minutes. He gave a final lunge, it tottered from its perch and with a grinding roar that was almost a shout of release, it started down the steep slope.

Clouds of dust arose. A trickle of loose shale, smaller rocks, stones and earth began to follow. The trickle grew into a small avalanche. The big boulder smashed into outcroppings of rock, broke them loose and added them to the flood. The roar increased.

The boulder leaped downwards like a live thing. It struck a ledge, sprang high in the air and sailed clear over the cabin to go bounding down the level floor of the canyon. But after it sailed a flood of debris poured down upon the cabin like flood water.

IN A moment the log house was buried to the eaves in rock and earth. As the dust began to settle, Red Hutton saw with satisfaction that the door was pinned shut by a ton of rocks and dirt.

Alarmed shouts came from within. Then glass shattered. Near the eaves a hand came forth. There was a window here and the men had broken the glass and were trying to dig themselves out.

Hutton slid down the talus, his high heels smoking as he braked himself to keep from going end over end. He ran to his horse. From the saddle-bag he drew forth a loaded six-gun. Then he raced for the cabin again.

An arm and a head were coming through the cleared space as he panted up. Hutton recognized the bristly features of Slash McGrew.

Recognition was mutual.

"It's Hutton! The sidewinder's trailed us!" McGrew shouted hoarsely.

"Here's yore beanshooter, McGrew!" Hutton rasped.

His shot tore a long splinter of wood from the window jamb and caused Slash McGrew's head to disappear.

"Look out! He's got a gun!"

Hutton laughed out loud.

"Beanshooter, huh? Thought yuh had me with my gun-belt down, huh?"

"Where'd that sidewinder get a gun?" demanded an aggrieved voice from inside. "It ain't fair!"

A shot roared from inside the half-

cleared window and a bullet tugged at Hutton's sombrero. He dived for cover. He'd forgotten they could shoot, too.

A fusillade of shots roared out of the broken window. Under its cover the outlaws tried desperately to clear away enough rocks so they could get out.

Hutton grinned in enjoyment. He squatted down behind a boulder and let the shots scream over his head. Every time a hand or arm appeared to clear the rocks, he let drive. A couple of screams told him his aim wasn't half bad in spite of his headache.

It might have ended in his retreat at last, for his ammunition was running low and the bandits had plenty. But with the sun two hours high and baking his neck uncomfortably, and with the window nearly cleared in spite of his opposition, the Bar J punchers arrived. And with them rode Judge Hiram Case.

"What's that old buzzard doin' here?" Hutton muttered in alarm.

He began to sidle toward his horse. The cowboys made short work of digging out the outlaws and disarming them. They marched out into the sunshine, arms raised. Slash McGrew was at their head.

He turned disgruntled eyes upon Red Hutton who was trying to look as inconspicuous as possible and sneak over to his cayuse.

"That sidewinder doublecrossed us!" McGrew complained. "He had a gun and he ain't supposed to. Yuh never would have caught us if—"

"What's that?" Judge Case roared. "Hutton!"

The cowboy turned innocent eyes upon the justice.

"Callin' me, Judge?"

"Yuh're danged tootin' I'm callin' yuh! What is this I hear? You been totin' a gun in defiance of my order?"

"No, sir, Judge. It's a danged lie," Hutton protested. "Look."

He indicated his waist, innocent of any gun-belt.

McGrew uttered an outraged howl.

"He's a blasted liar, Judge. Don't listen to the varmint! I tell yuh he's got a smokepole. He kept us trapped in that cabin for two hours. Look at them bullet holes in the window!"

THE judge dismounted. He strode over to the cabin and looked. When he turned back his moon face was slow-

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ly growing purple and the jowls were beginning to quiver. He advanced on Red Hutton. The cowboy backed up.

"Hutton," grated the judge, "yuh've been lying. There are bullet holes in that cabin. I'm goin' to give yuh—"

"Now wait a minute, yore honor," Hutton protested rapidly. "Yuh said I couldn't carry a gun. I didn't carry it. It was in my saddle-bag. I followed your order exactly. *I didn't pack no gun.*"

"What?"

The judge stopped. He blinked rapidly. This was a legal technicality which, being a lawyer, he could recognize. His jowls quivered rapidly. Then he decided to cut through all red tape.

"That's a mere quibble," he ruled. "A quibble worthy of a lawyer. The fact remains that yuh violated my order."

"Judge, wait," broke in a new voice.

Lem Johnson, owner of the Bar J, strode up.

"Ain't yuh forgettin'," he asked, "that Red here saved the herd? That if he didn't disobey yore order we would have lost all these cows?"

"That's yore affair!" the judge snapped. "I am only concerned with seein' that my rulings are obeyed."

"It's *yore* affair, too, Judge," the Bar J man said softly. "These critters are part of the herd yuh bought from me last week."

"What?"

The judge made a quick recovery.

"Uh—ahem! In view of these here extraordinary circumstances—and in view of yore heroic bravery under fire and yore devotion to duty, Red Hutton, this here court is graciously pleased to suspend sentence and withdraw the order forbidding yuh to pack a shootin' iron on the range."

Red Hutton grinned like a Cheshire Cat. Slash McGrew made a disgusted noise in his throat.

The judge rumbled on.

"But that order still goes in Buzzards' Roost. If I ever catch yuh totin' a gun, or shootin' at signs in town, I'll slap yuh in jail until yuh grow moss.

Red Hutton was backing up.

"Yes, sir, yore honor."

He turned and ran for his horse. A bulge in the back of his levis looked suspiciously like a long-barreled Colt. But no one mentioned it. They were busy with the captured outlaws.

BLIZZARD MAIL

(Continued from page 82)

thing—saves me the trouble of killin' him."

Five minutes passed. Then a figure wearing a gray hat and a sheepskin coat stepped cautiously out of the cabin. He closed the door behind him and snapped the padlock into place. He walked along the street, disappearing into the shadows.

An hour later a group of white-clad horsemen were gathering at the south end of town. They were all masked by white hoods save one who wore a sheepskin coat and a gray hat. He had a dark bandanna tied across the lower part of his face and he had just ridden up to join the rest of the group.

"Yuh got him then, Slug," said the leader of the White Wolves as he saw the new arrival. "He's dead."

"Yeah," said the man in the sheepskin coat. "He's dead. Too bad we never got Carter to tell us when that shipment of gold was arriving."

"Yuh crazy, Slug?" demanded Gary. "Yuh know as well as I do that gold is coming in tonight in one of the wagons of that wagon train from the East. Ain't that why I gave orders for a raid on that train?"

"That's right," said the bandanna-masked horseman. "I forgot." His voice was hoarse. "This winter weather is gettin' me. I've got a cold."

"Yuh shore sound like it," said Gary. "Huh, looks like we've got a lot more men than usual."

"They're my men," said the man in the sheepskin coat. "I figgered the band wasn't big enough so I got us some new gun-slingers. They're all right."

"Better be," said Gary sullenly. "Come on. Let's get ridin'."

Thirty men rode away from the town, their white garments blending with the snow-mantled night. Only fifteen of them rode white horses. The rest were mounted on animals of various colors.

"We'll probably find the wagon train has holed up somewhere for the night,"

said Gary after a long silence as he rode beside the sheepskin-clad horseman. "But we'll blast them out of there and get the gold."

"Shore," said the man on his left in a gruff tone of voice.

ON AND on they raced through the cold winter night, the snow crunching beneath the hoofs of their horses. The clouds had cleared away and there were stars in the blue sky.

Ahead they finally spotted the gleam of campfires and knew they were approaching the spot where the wagon train had bedded down for the night.

"Get ready," called out Gary. "And blast down every one of them. Don't leave a soul alive to tell it wasn't the Indians that attacked the train. We ain't takin' any chances."

"Yuh never do," said the man in the bandanna mask as he wheeled his horse away from the leader of the White Wolves. "All right, men," he shouted. "Let them have it before they start on the train."

As he voiced the clarion call he snatched the bandanna mask away revealing the face of Alamo Paige. The men who were not mounted on white horses broke from the rest of the band, shedding their white garments as they did so.

Beneath their disguises they revealed the blue uniforms of the soldiers of a U. S. Cavalry troop.

"It's the soldiers! We've been tricked!" shouted Gary. "Fight for yore lives."

Guns roared, the sounds echoing through the cold night. Army men battled the white-clad riders at close quarters. From the very first Alamo Paige was in the thick of the fray, fighting beside the lieutenant in command of the men from Army Headquarters that Colonel Kesler had detailed for this mission at the pony express rider's request.

The White Wolves had not completely recovered from their surprise, and their ranks were being steadily depleted by the cool shooting of the army men. Six of them had been blasted out of their saddles and the other nine were milling around in a frantic effort to shoot down the soldiers.

A trooper uttered a cry of pain and slid out of the saddle to sprawl motionless in the snow. Another screamed as

[*Turn page*]

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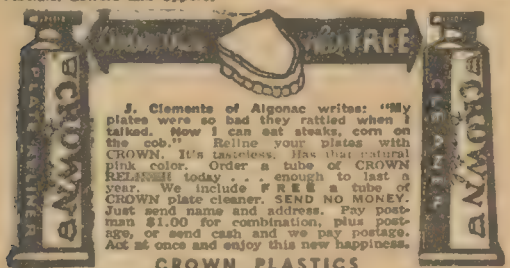

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a bullet tore into his arm.

"Yuh're to blame for all this, Paige!" shouted Gary, spurring toward the pony express rider with a Colt in his hand. "But I'm goin' to get yuh if it's the last thing I ever do."

Gary fired and Alamo Paige ducked as a bullet whistled by his own head. His own gun roared. Joe Gary reeled in the saddle, a bullet in his heart. Slowly he lifted up in the stirrups, then toppled into a snowdrift.

"That was the last thing he ever did all right," said the lieutenant who was riding beside Paige. "Looks like the battle is about over. I won't have much trouble convincing the colonel that it was this gang and not the Sioux that have been causing the trouble in this part of the country."

The firing had ceased, for the remaining members of the White Wolves band who were still alive had surrendered.

"I'm shore glad its over," said Alamo Paige. "I was gettin' worried."

"About stopping a bullet?" asked the lieutenant with a smile.

"No," said Paige. "I've got to make a pony express run the first thing in the morning and I shore need some sleep."

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TRAIL BLAZERS

(Continued from page 10)

ment like modern auto roads in the United States, it was the route of ox-drawn covered wagons making the long trek to the new lands of the far West.

Over it or over large parts of it travelled most of the pioneer homeseekers during the formative years when the West was building itself into the rich and glamorous empire that it is today.

Like the newly completed Alaska highway the Oregon Trail was also in a sense a military route.

Though it was the early trappers and mountain men bent on extending their lucrative fur trade clear to the Pacific Northwest that first laid out the major part of the western end of the Oregon Trail, it was an Army man, Capt. Ben L. E. Bonneville, who took the first wagons through South Pass to the mouth of Horse creek beyond Green river.

The tremendous significance of this feat lies in the fact that as a pack route for trappers the Oregon Trail was one thing. Proving its feasibility for wagon travel was the feature that actually meant the opening of the West. Settlers, homeseekers, families and all their goods could travel over a "wagon road." But they were stymied by a pack trail.

A Human Stream

So because it was a wagon road, a human stream from every State in the Union started pouring across the Oregon Trail a century ago.

The numbers who used the route swelled to a volume of unrecorded thousands of men, women and children.

In 1845 alone some three thousand emigrants elected to take the long trail through virgin wilderness to the fertile valleys of Oregon and Washington. The following year four thousand five hundred persons made use of the trail. Another thousand went on to California, rather than to the Pacific Northwest. And three thousand Mormons made their memorable hegira to the then uncleared site of Salt Lake City, Utah.

For ox teams and Conestoga wagons and a journey measured in long, hardship-filled months rather than days or weeks that was memorable traffic. It is hard to visualize it today. It is hard even to visualize the old, obliterated Trail though its route is an integral part of western history.

The Original Course

The original course of the Oregon Trail ran from Independence, Missouri, ten miles east of the present Kansas City, to the mouth of the Walla Walla river in what is now the State of Washington. For the first eighty miles its wide wagon ruts were the same as those of the old Santa Fé Trail. Traffic bound for Santa Fé and the Pacific Northwest mingled.

Near what is now Gardiner, Kansas, the Oregon route cut off to the north reaching the banks of the Platte river at about Grand Island. Then it followed the south bank of the Platte, where both wood and water were available, to its junction with the South Platte. It ascended the latter stream a short distance,

[Turn page]

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crossed it, again hit the south bank of the North Platte and followed that along to Fort Laramie.

Crossing the Platte near Casper, Wyoming, it veered southwest to the Sweetwater and followed the headwaters of that river up to the South Pass crossing of the Rockies. Down the west slope of the Rockies it struck and crossed the Green river and turned southwestward to old Fort Bridger.

Thence it turned north and west, went past Soda Springs, Idaho to Fort Hall and along the south bank of the Snake river to a crossing near what is now the city of Boise.

Then it followed the river a ways before cutting northwestward to the site of La Grande, Oregon, and went on down to the mouth of the Walla Walla river, officially the end of the trail.

Great Commonwealths

The unsettled West was a broad country in the days of the Oregon Trail. Yet it was mainly the courageous people, men and women alike, daring the danger-fraught trip in the early days who, together with their descendants, built up our great western commonwealths of Oregon, Washington and Idaho, and in a large measure California, Nevada and Utah.

Perhaps when the time comes some similar future is in store for those brave enough to choose the new highway to new homes and opportunities in Alaska.

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The old Oregon Trail is history. But the Alaska highway, born of a wartime necessity, is today's and tomorrow's route to a new empire. Its future lies still in the making.

—CAPTAIN RANGER.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

WELL, now that Captain Ranger's had his say, I reckon it's my turn. I sure hope that all you readin' hombres out yonder get as big a kick out of the Captain's little talks about the real West, old and new, as the bunch here at the home spread always does. There's something eternally fascinating about the West, and a lot of its history is just as exciting as any of the thousands of stories that have been written about it.

However, nothing can quite take the place of a real, rip-snortin' Western story. And in our next issue we've got one that, we think, will be right down the alley of all lovers of red-blooded, fast-action stories of the old West.

CALL OF THE LOBO, by Larry A. Harris, is a novel about a young hombre who hit the owlhoot trail with his father when he was only twelve years old, grew to manhood in a secret hideout valley—and what happened when he tried to leave his old life behind.

For years, big Kip Holt had ramrodded the Wild Horse bunch, and under his leadership they had got along right well—for owlhooters. They specialized in horses and made handsome profits by running big bunches of stolen stock south across the Mexican Border where buyers weren't too fussy about brands.

Pecos Holt was big Kip's son. His mother had been killed during an outlaw raid on Kip's ranch, when the big outlaw had been living straight. Now he rode with the Wild Horse bunch, knew its secrets and every member. He was proud of his father who, although an

[*Turn page*]

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outlaw, was a square-shooter and a pard who'd do to ride the river with.

But new men began joining the bunch, among them Grulla Kettler, a vicious, ruthless killer. Kettler had the knack of making men listen to him and got them to side him when he proposed that the gang branch out and have a try at cracking a cowtown bank.

Kip was against it, but he was outvoted. He rode along, with Pecos siding him. The raid went wrong and Kip died that night of the wounds he'd sustained. Before he died, Pecos swore to him that he'd even things up for him by killing his old enemy, Sheriff Burt Travis.

But Pecos little knew how tough it would be to keep that promise. For one thing, he didn't know about the sheriff's beautiful, blind daughter, Tana. When he finally did meet her, his entire hate-built pattern of life came crashing down about his head.

Knowing Tana Travis did something more to Pecos. It opened his eyes to the bleak sordidness of his outlaw life and fired him with ambition to change it—to do something worthy of this girl who faced so bravely a life of eternal darkness. Together with another member of the gang—an ailing, keen-minded and loyal old medico whose secret past no one knew—he set out to build a new life.

But he counted without Grulla Kettler. He knew too much about the Wild Horse bunch for Kettler to let him go. There was only one thing, then, for Pecos to do. It meant leaving the girl and the home he loved. It meant the raw red outlaw trails again. Grim-faced and bitter, a pair of six-guns tied low on his thighs, Pecos Holt rode out to meet his future.

We don't want to spoil your enjoyment of CALL OF THE LOBO by telling you what happens to Pecos, Tana and bitter, lovable old Doc Berry. It's a yarn that's full of the authentic atmosphere of the real West and packs a thrill on every page.

In the same issue you'll find another exciting novelet about Alamo Paige, of the Pony Express. In THE MAIL MUST GO THROUGH, by Reeve Walker, Paige has to buck one of the most dangerous combinations of crookedness and deviltry that ever tried to block the Pony Mail.

(Continued on page 96)

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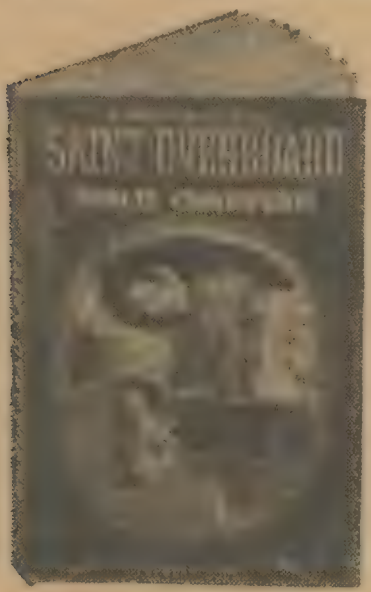

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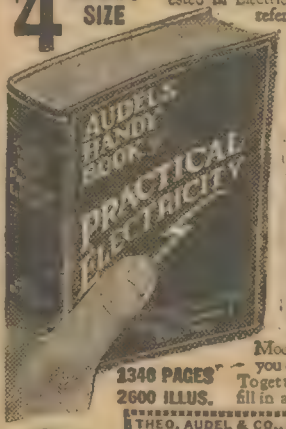

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TRAIL BLAZERS

(Continued from page 94)

Two hard-working old prospectors have made their one big strike. Their claim papers are going through to Sacramento by Pony Express. But there are men who want that mine themselves, and they, too, have claim papers. The real papers are carried in the *mochila* on Alamo Paige's horse. The fake papers are carried by an ex-Pony rider who is as crooked as a snake.

And to make doubly sure of their papers getting through first, the crooks see to it that the Indians, who are always on the lookout for the mail riders, are tipped off about Alamo Paige. So trouble rides the Pony Mail, and guns run red along the Overland Trail as Alamo Paige races over it.

And above the pounding of hoofs, the roar of guns, and the yells of red-skinned savages, the motto of the Pony Mail thunders in his ears: "The mail must go through." Reeve Walker has done a bang-up job in this latest Pony Express thriller. I think you'll all agree with me, when you read it.

There's another novelet by one of your favorite authors in the same issue: THE COWBOY FROM YUMA, by Walker Tompkins. Also LAW IN THE SADDLE, by Jackson Cole, another thrilling short story about the Arizona Ranger, Navajo Raine. So all in all, the next issue of EXCITING WESTERN shapes up as a real treat for all Western story fans.

Now let's see if we have time for a letter or two. They have been coming in steadily and we sure are glad to get them. Keep 'em coming, folks, so we can know how we're doin'.

Here's one from an hombre who signs himself "Brooklyn Cowboy":

Approved by Parents and Teachers

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I've read just about all the Western magazines there are, I guess, but yours is just about tops with me. The stories all seem more real than the others. They have more of the atmosphere of the real West. Maybe you think I wouldn't know about this, as I live in Brooklyn, but I've been West and read a lot of its history. Keep up the good work.

Thanks a lot, fella. We'll sure do our best. And here's one from Stan Weldon, of St. Louis, Missouri:

You've got a pretty fair magazine, except for that Alamo Paige guy. He's too darned perfect to live. I hope he finally bucks an outlaw who can shoot straight and gets his needin's soon. He's too much of a super-being to be believable.

Navajo Raine is pretty good, but he'd be better if he wasn't always so sure of himself. Sometimes I should think even his friends would like to take a poke at him.

I like your short stories better than the novelets. There's more variety in them.

What do the rest of you readers think about Stan Weldon's ideas? Write in and tell us—and give us your ideas, too. Your postcards and letters are welcome—and we'll try to print excerpts from as many of them as possible. Please address them to the Editor, EXCITING WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y.

See you soon.

—THE EDITOR.

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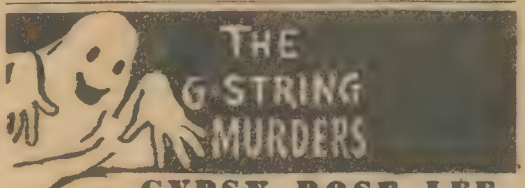

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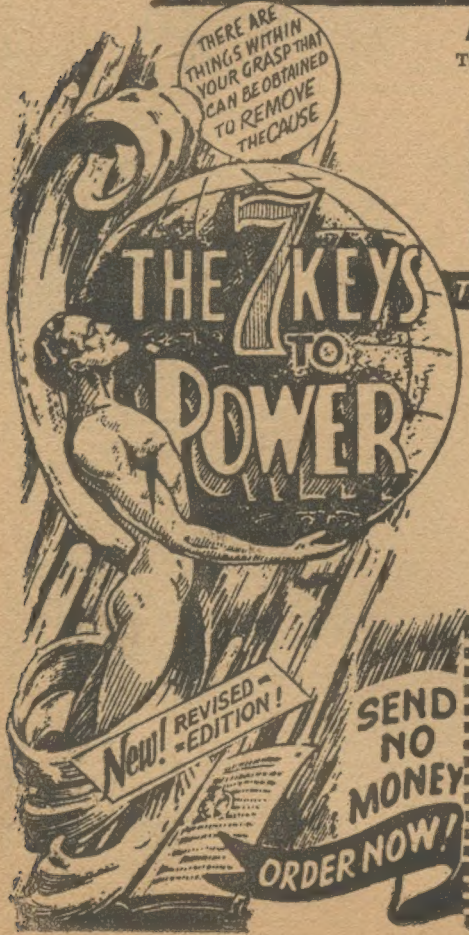
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